

Time's just holding me down (I'll tear up this town) by richiewheeler (gayrefrain)

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Summary:

The Snow Ball is this weekend, and the Demogorgon is back. Thankfully, so is Eleven.

Time's just holding me down (I'll tear up this town)

Author's Note:

- For [iamthedarkkiwi](#).

I don't know how to preface this, so I hope you enjoy!

Tuesday, January 10, 1984

How can you just leave me standing

Alone in a world that's so cold?

It's the night before Mike goes back to school from Christmas break, and the boys of Maple Street are having a sleepover in the basement.

But none of them are using the blanket fort. It remains intact, unused. A relic of Before.

Lucas brought his camouflage sleeping bag, Dustin is in his navy blue one, and Will is borrowing Mike's, a dark black one with really good padding. Mike isn't using a sleeping bag though, even though it's sleepover tradition. He's sleeping on the sofa, wearing the sweatshirt and sweatpants El wore when she stayed with him, while his friends are on the floor. But he doesn't think they mind.

Will lets out a slight cough, but he's been doing that a lot lately.

"Do you guys still get nightmares?" Dustin asks, after a long silence in the dark. None of them say anything. Luckily, that's not a problem for Dustin. "I do."

"What about?" Lucas asks, voice quiet.

Dustin says, very matter-of-factly, "The Demogorgon, mostly. It still has no face, and it screams. A lot. And, like, killed people and destroyed our school again."

Will speaks up, quiet in the way kids are when they speak in sacred sleepover confessions in the dark, "Sometimes I think I'm back in the Upside Down. But I can't escape, or I didn't hide." He goes quiet again, and none of the boys push him.

"My dad calls that posttraumatic stress disorder," Lucas explains. He says nothing for a moment, but then, "When I have the dreams, I'm fighting the Demogorgon with my wrist rocket, but then it eats all of you. Then me."

"I just see El," Mike says, finally speaking, "Exploding into a bunch of pieces. And I never see her again."

"I don't think she's dead," Dustin says. The sound of a zipper pulls down, but then in the faint light of the room, Mike sees his best friend's silhouette move to an upright position, his wild, curly hair sticking out. "She's a fricking superhero, they always come back."

"But it's not likely," Will says.

"Hey!" Mike snaps, leaning up on his palms too. "I know you never met her, but she was our friend. She saved our lives. She saved *your* life."

Will stammers, "I-I'm sorry-"

Mike takes a deep breath, and he's glad his friends don't call him out on him being a jerk. "It's okay," He says, calming down. And it is. "I'm sorry too. I just miss her."

"Me too," Lucas says.

"I want to cry when I eat Eggos sometimes," Dustin says.

"Me too," Mike says, but a bit softer.

Then, even though it's across the room and anyone who would use it is right beside him, his SuperComm crackles to life with static.

Without any further ado, they all leap from their bags and blankets and book it for the device.

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Nancy clutches the ripped photo of Barb, her tears steady but silent down her face.

After the funeral, Nancy ripped the photo of her best friend apart again, taking away the tape that she had once so carefully placed to hold it together. The *thing* in that photo destroyed Barb, and tore her from Nancy's life. She never wanted to see it again.

But just a crying session later, Nancy was putting it back together again, albeit with tinier pieces. It's the last photo of Barb Holland. Even though it hurts her heart to see it, she needs it there, with her.

Nancy wipes at her face with her hands but it's useless, so she goes to her bathroom to wash the tears off with a towel. She nearly stutters in her movements, startled by her reflection. Her face is paler than she'd like, and the tears made her eyes bloodshot and her face ruddy. She is not the same person she was two months ago.

The lights flicker and she flinches, instinctively shoving the washcloth in her mouth to stop any noises.

And all she wants is Barb, there beside her. To tell her what to do. To tell her what to say, how to handle this. How to deal with her being gone. But she can't. It's the cruelest twist of fate.

She goes back to her bed, leaving her light on and she strongly debates calling Steve. But it's just before midnight before the first day back from school. The goodie-two-shoes in her can't help but resist the urge.

Steve has been so strong these past two months. He held her hand at Barb's funeral, and hugged her when she cried over and over. He's helped her study, and even punched Tommy H in the face when he kept making cruel comments about how Barb was a "lesbo who got what she deserved". And, knowing it would be a bad time, never pushed her to repeat what happened between them the night Barb disappeared. At all. Hell, he even makes sure to never let her near his pool. He keeps her safe.

Nancy looks at the photo again, but this time thinks of Jonathan. Even with Barb gone, she knows she's lucky to have both Steve and Jonathan in her life, to keep each other safe and also remind each other that the night they fought the Monster was real. Because they saw it with their own eyes. They weren't crazy.

She debates going downstairs to see her brother, but knows he's safe with his friends.

Since Barb would want her to go to school and do well and get into Cornell, Nancy closes her eyes and tries to get some sleep.

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Wednesday, January 11, 1984

Things can only get better

And while I'm away

Dust out the demons inside

It's not the first night her son has spent the night away since his disappearance, but Joyce still can't sleep.

Jonathan is safe and sound in the next room, and she knows Will is safe at the Wheelers. Those poor boys have grown up so much in the last two months. It's a travesty.

She remembers being young and carefree, playing in the woods of Hawkins like every other kid. Not knowing there were government secrets and monsters with no faces lurking inside.

There was a loss of innocence, for her children and their friends. Hell, even for herself, and she's no spring chicken.

Joyce goes into the kitchen and pulls out a cigarette and lights it quickly. She'd promised Jonathan she'd quit but she still has a few in her last pack left. After that, she'll be done.

Exhaling the smoke out, and enjoying the pleasant burn, she surveys her own house.

The Christmas lights are mostly gone. Some still remain from actual Christmas, but Jonathan put them away. Her alphabet, that she created to talk to her baby boy while he was trapped in some kind of hell, is no longer on the wall. Jim got some new wallpaper and applied it himself.

Looking over where she had axed through the wall, she sees almost no evidence of it. Just the same wallpaper that's all over the room, revealing no change. Again, Jim's doing.

Joyce takes a shaky drag of that cigarette and touches where the hole would be in the opposing wall. She can still see it there. Can still see her Will crying at her through the red substance that almost looked like a heart from science class. She could lose her sight and still feel the same spot.

Not that Jim didn't do a good job covering it up. He did a great job, especially considering she couldn't pay him. Thinking back, he refused to accept her offers anyway, when she tried to pretend she could afford it and offered to repay him.

He just said, "It's square, Joyce. It's square." But he looked like something was eating at him, but before she could press it, he was walking back to his squad car and driving away.

She's known him since grade school, then re-learned him when he moved back after Sarah died and his wife divorced him in one fell swoop. And she saw him in an entirely new light after the disappearance of her youngest son, and watched him go fully sober since, as a friend, confidant and sponsor.

Hopper can be an ass, and many kinds at that, but he has a heart. And, she supposes, you'd be lucky if he showed it to you.

"Mom," A voice says, and Joyce jumps around to find it and maybe even fight it.

It's Jonathan. Even in the dark, she'd know him anywhere. "I thought

you were quitting." His voice is laced with exhaustion and disappointment.

"I still am," She says, but it sounds hollow to her. With a sigh, she goes to her ashtray and puts it out, trying hard not to think about how much that one cig costs.

"Are you not sleeping again?" He asks, padding over to her. "Should I call Hopper?"

She tries not to feel indignant about that, she doesn't need Jim Hopper to fix her, but then remembers he's a cop. He's supposed to fix things, and of course Jonathan would think that.

She exhales a sigh and pats his cheek, "I promise I'm good. Did I wake you?"

He shakes his head, his cheek still against her palm. "I was working on some photos. Then I heard some steps. But you have work, and I have school. Let's go to bed."

Of course, faced with the prospect of work, Joyce hits a wall of exhaustion, "You're a good boy, Jonathan," She says, now almost asleep. "You have too much on your shoulders."

As if to corroborate that, he places her arm around his shoulders and helps her walk to her room, saying nothing.

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Mike gets to the SuperComm first and fiddles with it. "El? El? Is that you?" He knows that it's really El who controls the device, but he still changes the channels to try to make a stronger connection.

The crackling intensifies, and all the boys stare at each other in anticipation. Then it goes silent.

"El is there," Dustin says. "She has to be—"

"*Mike?*" The SuperComm crackles to life, and El's voice rings through. It's a bit hazy, but he'd know her voice anywhere. He's been hearing it in his dreams and nightmares. "*Mike?*"

"El?" Mike frantically speaks into the device, as his friends all gasp in surprise and glee. "El, can you hear me? Over."

"Yes... Over?" She says, hesitantly, trying to figure out the phrasing.

"Where are you? Are you safe? Over."

"Bad," She says, "*Upside Down. But... safe.*"

Mike lets out a breath he didn't know he was holding, "El, how do we get you back? How do we get you back home? Tell us what to do," He looks at his friends, huddled around him, and he knows that they'd collectively do anything to bring her back.

"Not safe," Her voice is starting to fritz across the radio, "*Don't go inside Upside Down. Promise?*"

Even though he doesn't want to, Mike says, "Promise." Lucas grabs his camouflage bandana and fastens it to his forehead, like he's already gearing up for a war.

"Snow Ball," She says, as Will starts to cough. Mike holds the earpiece to his ear a bit closer, even though the device is already digging into the side of his head. "*The Snow Ball, Mike.*"

"I know, El," Mike says, and his chest feels tight. "I promise, I will take you. B-But I need to find you-"

"Go," El says, the signal getting lost but he can still hear her. "*Dance. The Snow Ball. New gate. But bad. New monster.*"

"There's a new gate? At the Snow Ball?" Mike says, and he looks at his friends in surprise and shock. They look confused too. That's not good. "El, what's bad? Are you safe-"

"Snow Ball," She says instead of answering and then the line turns to static then goes dead.

"El? El!" Mike starts to press the buttons and fiddle with the dials, getting more and more frantic until Dustin forces the SuperComm from Mike's grip. Mike lunges for it, but Lucas holds him back.

“The signal is lost,” Lucas says, and it takes him a moment, but Mike stops struggling. “But she’s alive. Breaking your Comm won’t help.”

Mike, shaking a bit, nods, and Will bolts up and runs to the bathroom. There’s silence, but then they hear him gagging. Again, like the coughing, Will’s been doing that a lot lately.

Lucas finally lets Mike go, so he slumps his shoulder, suddenly drained.

“He’s just nervous,” Dustin says about Will, twisting the SuperComm in his hands. “He probably doesn’t like to think about the Upside Down.” Mike and Lucas nod.

“But... we *are* going to the Snow Ball? Right?” Mike asks, looking at his best friends.

“Duh,” Dustin says, at the same time Lucas says, “Hell yeah.”

Mike smiles to himself, and he suddenly feels lighter than he has in weeks.

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Jim wakes up, shaking and sweating. It’s been eight weeks (and one day and twenty hours) since he last drank alcohol, but only just a few seconds from his last nightmare.

This one is all too vivid in his mind, because he’s been having it almost every night. He’s in what the kids kept referring to as the Upside Down, and it’s pretty aptly named. If their normal world is light and clear, this one is dark and disgusting, filled with evil creatures, floating dust that he still coughs up, and the unknown horrors that lie within.

As he travels this Hell with Joyce Byers in his dreams, they end up in the same place. The walls are covered in the same sticky muck that covers everything, and they see a child attached in the slime.

But instead of seeing Will Byers, he sees his Sarah, even balder than Eleven and even more gaunt, struck with the cancer that killed her along with the nightmare substances that are draining her. In his

nightmares, each time, he pulls the monster tube from his daughter's throat. Sometimes the dream ends before he can succeed, but this time, he does and tries to perform CPR. And just like in real life, for his daughter, it didn't work.

Jim looks his clock, 6:45AM. A good a time as any to get ready to go to work. Especially since he has nothing better to do.

He remembers when those asshole scientists at Hawkins Lab made him think he had gone on a bender after he broke into their building, drugging him then placing him around empty alcohol and pill bottles. And there was a time he would have believed it and brushed it off. But now he's sober, and he's a sheriff who's on time.

Or only late by a few minutes.

Then he goes to his bathroom. It's been two months, but there's still only one of his light bulbs in the fixture there. He did it on purpose, to remind him that the insanity that happened was real.

He washes at his face with freezing water and forces himself to eat breakfast that isn't Eggos, even though it would be easiest. He needs to hoard those to take to Eleven. After screwing the poor kid over, in a way, he leaves what Mike Wheeler said was her favorite food in a box by the tree Nancy Wheeler said she crawled into when she and Jonathan Byers were in the woods. The scientists think he's doing it to help them, but he's doing it for himself.

The tree looks normal to him, but he feels a bit guilty. It'd be easier to mask with some bourbon or even cheap vodka, but he doesn't ever want to be unaccountable for his actions again.

After getting dressed in his uniform, Jim reaches for his sobriety coins, the most recent being dark gold for two months, and twists it in his fingers. He briefly wonders if he deserves the ease and his life, any of it, with all that's happened.

Deciding it's too goddamn early to debate anything or think too hard, he puts all three of his coins in his breast pocket like habit and goes to work.

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Nancy walks the Hawkins High hallways alone. She knows Jonathan is already in the dark room, which makes her happy because that means he likes and is using his new camera. And Steve usually ditches homeroom, so she's alone.

Sometimes she thinks people are staring at her, but she's learned to ignore it. Or at least live with it. But it was easier to have Barb there.

Taking a deep breath, she opens her locker and braces herself for some sort of nasty surprise, like something Tommy H and Carol would leave in her locker. There's nothing. At ease, she starts to put her books away.

"Nance?"

At her name, she spins around to see who could be talking to her. It's Steve. She immediately deflates in relaxation. "Oh, hi, Steve," She smiles and gives him a kiss.

"You okay?" He's frowning, placing a hand on her waist as if to steady her.

"I'm fine," She answers, and it's the truth, "Just a bit skittish, I- I wasn't expecting to see you."

"I have some good news, that's why I came early," He moves to place himself beside her open locker, so she continues to adjust her school supplies according to her schedule that she has memorized.

"What is it?" She asks, looking over at her boyfriend, who looks so pleased.

"My dad finally got his first paycheck from his new promotion, and to celebrate, he gave me a chunk. Wanna go see a movie and get some dinner this Saturday?" He asks.

Touched, Nancy smiles, carefree, "I'd love to." With that, she goes to shut her locker. "Will... do you wanna walk me to homeroom?"

He wraps an arm around her waist, pulling her close, "I'd love to."

They walk side-by-side in the halls, and Nancy feels a bit better. Curious, she says, “You mentioned that your dad got promoted, but where to?”

“He was at the Department of Energy, but they moved him to Hawkins Lab,” Steve answers, his fingers tapping out a beat on Nancy’s side. “You know, the one in the woods?”

Nancy nearly trips over herself in surprise, “*The* Hawkins Lab?”

One night, after everything, she heard Mike having a nightmare, so she woke him up and they talked all night, keeping their promise of no more secrets. She told him everything (minus sleeping with Steve because her brother is twelve and he doesn’t need to know that anyway) and he told her everything, except, she suspects, his own crush on Eleven.

But he mentioned Hawkins Lab. They were the ones who did that to Eleven.

Oblivious to her thoughts, Steve says, “I also had another thing to ask you. I mean, I figured we were kind of golden on it, but I want it to be official. Nancy Jennifer Wheeler, will you go to the Snow Ball with me?”

There’s nothing extravagant about his offer, just Steve walking casually beside her with a smile on his face. But in a way, in every way actually, it’s great.

“I’d love to,” Nancy says, and she likes having something to distract her from the thoughts of Hawkins Lab.

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Mike sits with his friends at lunch, anxious and exhausted. He tried going to sleep after what happened, but he was just so purely excited. El is *alive*. He heard her voice, he talked to her. She’s alive, and she’s coming back to him. He knew, deep down, that she was okay. But he also felt stupid about thinking it. And now he can know she’s alive without being stupid about it, and also find a way to bring her back.

“So I’m thinking we should try to contact El using the Heathkit,

before we go to the Snow Ball,” Mike says, pushing food around on his tray without eating it, a bit nervous about proposing this idea.

“Didn’t we fry it last time?” Lucas asks. “It might not work.”

“Our SuperComms aren’t supposed to work farther than a block, but El used it to talk to us from the Upside Down,” Dustin points out, mouth full of chocolate pudding. Lunch Lady Phyllis finally stopped hoarding them, and he couldn’t be happier. “I don’t think anything can stop El.”

“I- I don’t think we should go to the Snow Ball,” Will says, voice unsure and quiet, eyes on his lunchbox. The other three boys whip their heads around.

“Why the hell not?” Lucas asks.

“If El is there-” Mike starts, on Lucas’s side.

“Then it could be really dangerous,” Will says, finally looking up at them. “You guys got *lucky* last time. I-I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“We promise we’ll be okay,” Mike says, because Will looks terrified. “We’ll have El, and I bet Nancy’s going with Steve and maybe even Jonathan will come too. I know my mom’s trying to get your mom to chaperone. We’ll be totally safe, adults and everything,” He tries to reassure his friend.

“Yeah, Nancy and Steve kicked major ass with the Demogorgon,” Dustin says. “She told me herself, they beat it with a baseball bat-”

“I thought that was mostly Steve,” Lucas says.

“It doesn’t matter, it’s just fricking amazing all around!” Dustin says enthusiastically, then turns to Will, “Basically, you’ll be safe, buddy. Promise.”

At the sound of the word “promise,” Mike is back to thinking about El, and it reminds him. “So, tomorrow during lunch, we get into the AV Room?”

Immediately, Lucas and Dustin say, “Deal.” Then they all turn to Will. He gives them a nervous smile, but a smile nonetheless, “Deal.”

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“Shit,” Joyce says to herself, watching as the car pulls up. She frantically goes to try to put the cigarette out. Karen Wheeler is earlier than she expected, and she probably has Holly with her, and Karen always gets a bit put off when Joyce smokes around her toddler.

Like a flailing bird, she waves around the smoke, trying to get it to disappear, along with trying to ignore the fact that it’s another cigarette wasted.

Right on time, the doorbell rings, so Joyce strides over to answer the door. “Hi Karen,” She greets.

Like she expected, the Perfect Mom of the PTA Karen Wheeler walks in, with her adorable daughter on her hip, not a hair out of place. If the other woman wasn’t so nice, Joyce would hate her a little. She also greets her daughter, “Hi, Holly.”

“Hi!” Holly says, cheerful and bright.

“Hello, Joyce,” Karen says with a smile. “Thanks for letting me stop by, I just wanted to go over supplies and time commitments for the dance.”

“Of course, and please come in.”

They move to the kitchen table, and Joyce is struck by the déjà vu feeling of when Will was missing and Karen brought a casserole, with her daughter in tow. And Joyce was a mess and there was Karen Wheeler, a sort-of friend from high school looking perfect as always.

It’s weird how some things can stay the same, yet can be so drastically different.

Joyce wrings her hands together, “So, scheduling?”

“Yes, that’s the brunt of it,” Karen pulls out a folded sheet of paper from her handbag and hands it to Joyce, who looks over the available times. Most of the slots are filled, or slightly taken by people Joyce is sure are not a fan of her.

The one that looks the best is the earliest one, with Karen’s name next to it. That would actually work. Since Hawkins is so small, the Snow Ball for the students are merged in both the schools and the middle schoolers dance before the high schoolers show up. If she times it right, she can drive Will over and then leave before Jonathan goes, avoiding embarrassing him. Plus, she should be free, she has no shifts on Friday evenings, even with her promotion.

“Mind if I work this one with you?” She asks, wanting to make sure she’s not imposing.

“Of course, go ahead,” Karen says, bouncing Holly in her lap as Joyce signs the paper. “So... how are things nowadays? Any trouble from Lonnie?”

He’s called a couple times, usually to demand money, but the last time she actually saw him was when he stopped by the hospital to tell Will he’ll be “back on the baseball diamond in no time.” She almost beat him with a bedpan.

“No trouble, really,” Joyce says, only lying a little.

“He always seemed so skeevey to me in high school,” Karen says, absently, as she adjusts Holly’s pigtails, “Just seemed like such a-”

Not feeling like talking about this and how stupid she was as a teenager, Joyce violently fake-sneezes, causing Holly to jump in surprise. Covering her face with her flannel sleeve, Joyce says, “Oh my gosh, bless me, I’m so sorry, I just need to run and get a tissue.”

Joyce tries to walk not run to their bathroom and makes sure to blow her nose, even though she’s fine. Her body is strong like an ox, she never gets sick. Not even when she breathed in the “Upside Down” air to make sure her baby boy was okay.

To regain herself, she leans over her sink, and takes a deep breath.

Then chokes on it.

Crawling out of the drain is a dark, black, slimy slug that almost glows; it doesn't look like it's of this world. It looks like something out of her nightmares. Or worse... Oh god, is there a new gate to the Upside Down in her house?

Shit.

Almost panicking, Joyce runs her hands through her hair, and goes back outside to deal with Karen.

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After school, Nancy waits by Jonathan's locker, after telling Steve she'd go to visit him shortly. "Hey, Nancy," Jonathan says, adjusting his backpack. "Something wrong?"

"Yes- no," She corrects when he immediately moves closer in worry. "I'm fine, promise." Sometimes, she wishes they'd stop being so protective of her. She can handle herself.

"Oh... then, what's going on?"

She pulls him a bit closer, "Remember how we didn't get much more information on the monster?"

His interest is immediately peaked, and they lean in close to keep this a secret, "Of course. Did- did you learn something new?"

"Kind of. Steve's father is now the head of Hawkins Lab."

"The place that experimented on Eleven?"

"That's what Mike said," Nancy says, agreeing, "And he said they're the ones that released the monster-"

"The Demogorgon," Jonathan corrects, because that's what the kids are calling it.

Nancy just barely reigns in the urge to call it 'nerdy shit,' now is not the time. "Sure, whatever. Anyway, even though we took it down a

bit, and Eleven killed it, I think we need more answers. I was wondering,” She takes a deep breath to gather the courage, “If you’d be interested in coming with me and Steve to try to find out more.”

She watches as he contemplates, emotions she can’t read flickering on his face, and then finally he nods, “Sure. When can Steve-”

Suddenly, Jonathan is shoved into the lockers beside him with a loud metallic twang, and Nancy hears the unfortunately familiar snarky laughs of Tommy H and Carol. She catches them just as they spin around to continue talking shit.

“Watch where you’re going, queer,” Tommy says, snaking his hand around Carol’s waist, the girl in question flipping them off with a lighthearted laugh before they turn back to walk down the hallway like they own it.

“Ignore them-” Nancy tries to offer advice but Jonathan just shuts his locker.

“I’m fine,” He says, quietly but resolutely. She nods. Out of everyone, she knows he would be, and will be. “Let’s go talk to Steve, because...” This time, he seems to be the one that needs the courage, taking a deep breath before he says, “I think something’s the matter with Will.”

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Joyce practically throws the door open, “Thank you so much for coming so quickly-”

Immediately, Hopper shuts the door and withdraws his gun, even though they both know creatures from the Upside Down are barely affected by bullets.

“Which bathroom?” He says, voice low as he grabs Joyce and shoves her behind him, as if she wasn’t alone in the house with the thing before he got there. But this is not the time to be needlessly antagonistic. They need to work together.

“The one in the hallway,” Joyce answers, sticking behind Hopper but letting him lead because he’s practically twice her size and at least

has a weapon.

As quietly as they can, they walk down the hallway. Joyce's nerves are on edge, and she's shaking. Right before he opens the door, Hopper seems to notice this. "Are you okay, Joyce?" He asks. His blue eyes are intently focused on her, and she hates how irrationally safe she feels in his hands. Metaphorically, since he's standing a few inches away. But the warmth is there.

Not trusting her voice, she nods. Hopper takes this as an acceptable answer, as he should she's *fine*, and finally opens the door.

The slug is now on the mirror, and it's gotten bigger since she saw it. Joyce shoves her hand into her mouth and bites down hard to stop her scream.

Without taking his eyes off it, Hopper throws his free hand behind him, and she grabs on tightly like an anchor.

"How much do you like that mirror?" Hopper asks speculatively, as he adjusts his aim as if he were going to shoot with only one hand.

"Hop, no-"

At that, he shoots at the slug-like creature, and actually hits it dead-center. It releases the most unholy of screeches, and Joyce ducks down, covering her ears to protect herself and squeezing her eyes shut.

Once the noise is over, she staggers to an upright position and surveys what's happened in the short amount of time.

Hopper is now wiping up the black goop (blood?) covered mirror with a ratty towel before throwing it in the sink. He pulls out his lighter, "The Wheeler girl and your son said fire really damaged it. The corpse of it is still in your sink too. Mind if I set that shit on fire?"

Joyce stammers out, "G-go ahead," very lost and not sure how to proceed.

With that, the Chief of Police lights the corpse of a demonic slug in

her sink. As the room lights up in the orange glow of the miniature bonfire, he turns to her and says, “Now what in the fresh hell was that?”

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Even though it’s practically the exact opposite of Hawkins Lab, El finds that the Upside Down reminds her of where she grew up. While the Lab is light and sterile and the Upside Down is dark and dirty, they’re both cruel. They both have bad memories. They both don’t have Mike. Or Eggos.

Now that the Demogorgon is gone, the Upside Down is lonely and empty. She’s mostly been trapped in the school’s dark side, trying to put herself back together after the destruction. The boys, when they played that board game, would refer to “energy levels.” Hers was below zero. Now she’s almost whole. Which is good, she hasn’t had much else to focus on other than fixing herself.

Mostly, she just misses Mike, and Dustin and Lucas and Joyce, even Nancy and Jonathan. But not the Chief. No.

She wanders the Upside Down, avoiding where the bodies are. She breathes comfortably, which is odd because she saw what it did to Will, but she remembers that Papa explained to her, when he made her enter the Upside Down before they knew about the Demogorgon, that her abilities negated any “toxic matter” and could even potentially make her stronger. But then they heard about the Man with the Fuzzy Hat so she had to return to the Rightside Up.

Mostly, she stays in the school, because that’s where her plan will commence, or she goes to the box by the tree with the Eggos and other food. She’s not sure who’s putting the food there but she needs it. But she’s not going to check there today. Because right now, she’s going to Mike’s house. Sort of.

His house in the Upside Down is covered in the slug slime, but the blanket fort he made her is still there.

She sits in the blankets, covered in dust and slime but she feels... good. Warm, even in the cold of the Upside Down. There’s even a

version of the radio device Mike, Lucas, and Dustin used. But it's broken, with missing knobs and splintered plastic that digs into her skin. Even broken, it reminds her of them.

Afraid of using more of her energy, since she has at least forty more hours to use it all to try to breach the gate, she doesn't reach out to Mike again. Instead, she holds the radio close to her and snuggles up to it amidst the blankets and the darkness. Down to her core, she misses the real thing.

"Mike," She says, more to herself than trying to let the message leave the Upside Down and go to him. "Home soon. Promise."

+

Jonathan's not sure if it's because of Nancy or because of any lingering questions after taking down the Demogorgon, but Steve is very receptive to sneaking them into Hawkins Lab right after school. Before their joint attack, he would have just said the former, but now he's more inclined to admit that both could be a factor.

"Will we get clearance?" Jonathan asks, killing his car's engine as he keeps his eyes on the entrance.

"That's why we stopped at McDonald's," Steve shakes the greasy bag of fast food. It smells pretty damn good. "I'm gonna pretend to be dropping this off for him."

"I thought you were just hungry," Jonathan says, putting his hands in his pockets. That's what Steve had said anyway.

They all start getting out of the car. "That too," Steve waggles his eyebrows playfully. "My dad isn't touching this stuff, we'll eat it as we go through the information. Leave the talking to me, and I'll get us in."

Jonathan's eyes glance over at Nancy, who's now walking in between them. He remembers when "we" and "us" just meant her and him, not her and him and Steve the Boyfriend. But it's fine. Steve saved his life. And Nancy's, and maybe in correlation, Will's. It's hard to hate that guy. But he still kind of does.

They walk up to the entrance kiosk place, guarded by men with guns and a single security guard inside. They seem wary of the fact a group of teenagers are approaching on foot. They parked their car just a couple hundred feet away, not wanting them to put any devices in it.

"Hello, kids," The guard says, his hand oh-so-casually on his gun. Jonathan swallows. He's fought a giant demon monster, but *that* scares him.

"Hi there," Steve says, laying on the charm. He holds up the greasy bag. "I'm Steven Harrington's son, Steve Jr. I just wanted to surprise my dad and bring him some lunch."

The guard stares at him, then looks at Jonathan and Nancy. "And these two are?"

"My girlfriend and my best friend," Jonathan nearly chokes on air at that, but keeps himself quiet. "We were going to see a movie, but I wanted to stop by."

"Can I see some I.D.?" The guard asks. All three of them grab their driver licenses and hand them over. The guard flashes a light over them and scrutinizes them.

"Glad to finally meet the boss's kid," He says, good-naturedly. "I'll just call to let Mr. Harrington now-"

"Well, my dad *did* say that there was a meeting wrapping up around this time, but I guess you can go ahead and let him know," Steve says, tapping his fingers on the bag. "I was trying to time it so I could surprise him-" Nancy and Jonathan share a look, then see the guard purse his lips to the side in thought.

He starts scribbling on some guest passes, "Why don't you kids go on in. Don't go wandering in the construction areas, or any place marked unavailable to the public, and be quick about it."

Steve grabs the passes, "Thank you so much, sir. We promise to be quick."

The bar lifts itself up and the trio walk right in.

“Impressive, Harrington,” Jonathan isn’t too proud to admit.

“Happy to help,” Steve says, placing an arm around Nancy as they stroll through the gate.

But then Nancy looks to him instead. “Before we get in the entrance, tell us more about your brother.”

+

Once the fire burns itself out and there is nothing but ashes in the sink, Joyce watches as Hopper douses it with water and turns to her, “Do I have to repeat myself, Joyce? What the hell was that?”

“I don’t know,” She says, feeling her knees tremble. “Is there still a gate in my house? Is this not over?” She looks down at her hand that she bit. She broke skin. Dammit.

“The kids said that girl destroyed the monster,” Hopper says, then finally gives her a real look. “C’mom, let’s go in the kitchen.”

The whole area is a mess, but now it doesn’t seem to matter. The two adults sit down in dining room chairs, and Hopper immediately goes for a cigarette and offers her one, but she shakes her head. He raises an eyebrow. Joyce tries not to think about all the times they sat outside Hawkins High and chain-smoked during lunch together because that just makes her itch for another.

“Jonathan wants me to quit,” She says, rubbing at her shoulder. But after seeing that unearthly slug, she wants another cigarette. Or five.

Surprising her, he puts away his pack instead and soon it’s just the two of them, nothing else, at the table.

“Do you think there’s still a gate in my house, Jim?” Joyce asks, again, because he didn’t really give her a straight answer.

“I don’t know,” He says, like he’s disappointed in himself. “When I made that... *deal* with Hawkins Lab, they said they’d fix the holes.” Joyce takes a deep breath and tries to calm down. “But I’m sure it’s just leftover from when your son said he and his friends fought the monster in your house.”

She nods, and accepts that a truth, mostly because she can't think of another explanation. She hasn't seen the lights flicker, and she hasn't heard anything from her sons about it. It'll be fine.

But something about the way he said "deal" has her curious. She's a mother, and the ex-wife of an asshole, so she *knows* something is up.

"Jim... what was the agreement you made with the scientists?" She finally asks him, looking at his reaction carefully. On his face, before it goes into his police chief poker face, she sees one emotion very clearly. Regret.

"Hopper..." Her voice is lethally calm, with that edge only mothers get, "You better answer me right now."

"Joyce, you don't understand-" His voice is just condescending enough to piss her off.

"Answer me, dammit!" She yells the words, pushing her chair back so hard that it clatters to the floor and now she's standing. Her small height isn't intimidating in the slightest but it's all she's got. "What did you do?"

"I did it for your son," He says, like he's reminding her. And she knows, she'll probably be forever in his debt. But that's not the point.

"Answer me," Shaken to the core, she refuses to give this up. He's still silent, but now he's going for the cigarettes.

"Just sit down," He says, cigarette between his teeth. "I'll tell you the whole thing."

+

Knowing his friends are coming over before dinner, Mike has a short frame of time to get his mom to agree to let him go to the Snow Ball.

"Hey Mom," He says, casually approaching her in the kitchen. "Is it okay if I go to the Snow Ball?"

"Of course," She says, pausing in making the lasagna to look up and smile at him.

“Awesome, thanks-” He goes to turn around and call Lucas, Will, and Dustin to let them know before they show up, but then his mom speaks up.

“Are you going with someone?” His mom asks. Her voice is weird, like she’s excited.

Mike furrows his eyebrows in confusion, “Yeah. Dustin, Will and Lucas.”

His mom looks at him, “Oh, I just thought...” She trails off.

Curious, he asks, “Thought what?”

“That maybe you were going with a girl, is all,” She says, giving him a look that he can’t read.

Mike feels his whole face flush and he stammers out, “What? No. Not at all, no. Ew.”

His mother raises an eyebrow, and speaks in that way like she knows a secret he doesn’t know, “Well, sure, if you say so.”

“Well, I do,” He insists, still blushing. “I’m just going to the dance with my friends, no big deal.”

“Of course,” She says, humming with a smile on her face. Moms are weird.

Luckily, the doorbell rings. Desperate for an exit, Mike shouts “I GOT IT” and goes to the door, and opens it to see Dustin and Lucas.

“Hey guys. Is Will coming?” Mike asks as he lets them in, looking around his lawn before shutting the door to keep the cold out.

Dustin shakes his head, ridding his hair of the light snow outside. “Nah, he called me and said he doesn’t feel good. But that we should go ahead and plan without him and we can fill him in tomorrow.”

“What are you guys planning for?” His mom appears, and they all jump in surprise.

“The dance,” Lucas immediately covers. He’s always the best at being the sneakiest. “What we’re gonna wear... And stuff.”

“I can take you boys shopping if you want-” His mom goes to offer.

“No!” All three of them shout out. Shopping is the *worst*. Plus, they might be fighting in these clothes, if things go sideways. “I mean,” Mike tries to cover. “We already have clothes. They’ll be fine.”

“If you boys say so, but let me know if you change your mind,” His mom offers, still looking smug.

“Will do,” Mike says. “Thanks, Mom!” With that, he shoves his friends down to the basement.

“Why was your mom acting so weird?” Dustin asks, taking up residence at his spot on their Dungeons and Dragons table.

“She just thought I was gonna go to the dance with a girl or whatever,” Mike tries to shrug it off but Lucas and Dustin share a look.

“Well, aren’t you *technically* going to the Snow Ball with El?” Lucas asks, raising an eyebrow.

“No. What? No. Shut up,” Mike says, only to be met with more matching smirks from Lucas and Dustin. “What’d you guys bring?” He changes the subject.

“It’s more like what *didn’t* I bring,” Dustin says and empties his bag onto the table.

Oh god.

+

Nancy listens closely as Jonathan starts the explanation, because he’s keeping his voice low. Sneaking a look at all the military personnel and guards, that’s probably safest. “He’s just been acting really... off since he came back,” He starts, looking around too. The only one who doesn’t look concerned about being around the guards is Steve, so Nancy moves closer to her boyfriend.

"Maybe that's trauma," Steve supplies.

Jonathan shakes his head, "I think it's more than that. He doesn't..." He stops talking, then shoves his hands in his pockets. "It's stupid."

"No, explain," Nancy says, wanting to help, to understand. "I mean, please. We want to help." Steve nods at that. They both wait a moment.

Jonathan barely winces, and doesn't say anything, which makes Nancy feel irrationally sad. She thought they could trust each other, after everything. Before she can tell him to forget it, he explains, about the night terrors, the secrets Will's kept from their mom, the paleness, and the near-incessant coughing as quickly as he can. "And I'm worried about him," He adds. "It's scaring me."

"Well, your mom said the scientists said the environment was toxic, and he was there for a week," Nancy says. She herself felt awful for two days after being in that terrible tree and the Upside Down, and she was in there for just a few minutes. "It could just be a side-effect."

"I know, but it's been almost two months, and it's getting worse," Jonathan insists. "Maybe, when we're in there, we can see what they know about exposure to it."

"Good idea," She says. "I want to find out more about the monster--"

"Demogorgon," Jonathan corrects. She doesn't get why he insists on it.

"I like that," Steve says, sending Jonathan a smile. Jonathan half-smiles back.

"Whatever we call it, I want to know more," Nancy says. She's not personally a fan of the name because it makes it not real, in her mind, but it doesn't really matter. "Let's go in quickly, the soldiers are making me uncomfortable."

At that, Steve pulls Nancy a bit closer, and she relishes the warmth. Out of the corner of her eye, she watches Jonathan pick up his pace and walk in front of them.

The halls are white tile, and eerily quiet. If people are around them, they're in clean lab coats with cold looks on their faces that cause her to recoil. These people, according to her brother, Mrs. Byers, and her brother's friends, experimented on drugged-out people and an innocent child.

Nancy doesn't like the fact they're on new ground, at their mercy. But one thought of Jonathan's nervous face as he opened up about his fears, and what she's heard from Mike, Lucas and Dustin, she keeps herself trudging forward.

+

"So yeah," Jim says, wrapping up his story, but his voice is accelerating and rising in volume. Joyce is shaking, and she looks furious, but he *knows* he did the right thing. So he explains, "I gave her location away. But I did it for-"

Still shaking, she interrupts him, "You sacrificed her to those sadistic assholes? How could you, Jim? She's a *child*-"

Jim slaps his palms on the kitchen table and stands so now they're both leaning over her table. "No, she's a *weapon*! I did what I had to so I could save your son-"

"Yes but you could have thrown them off! You didn't have to tell the truth! God knows they never did! Instead, you practically threw her back into labs, so she could get tortured." She reaches for a cigarette then stomps away from it so she's at the other side of the kitchen, smokeless. "How could you, Hop? How could you have done that to a child? Imagine if that was Sarah-"

"How dare you," He cuts her off, his voice chill and callous. "My daughter was *nothing* like that experiment."

"A young girl? Shaved head? Trapped in a hospital? Dying-" Joyce goads him, as his fists clench. Watching him carefully, she seems to start a whole new conversation as he internally reels with her words. Nothing's making sense. "Don't you dare tell me that you did the right thing. I-" She clears her throat and says, "You saved my son, and I can never repay you for that. But you threw a little girl to the

beasts, James.” He winces at his full-first name. “I need you out of my house.”

“Joyce-” He needs her to understand, to let him explain.

“Get out of my house!” She screams it at him and whips a dirty dish to the floor. It shatters to pieces.

It’s suddenly quiet.

Jim stands, his movements slow, because he wants her to change her mind. To let him explain. But she’s looking at him with pure hatred in her eyes, and something inside him shatters like that goddamn plate. With seeing that ;ppl in the only person who’s made him happy these past few years, he grabs his shit and leaves.

Going to his car, Jim kicks a tire and looks back at the house, but Joyce isn’t standing in the doorway beckoning him back. With a sharp exhale, he goes to unlock his car but hears a whimper.

Whipping around, Jim sees Will Byers, pale and shivering, standing perched on his bike just off to the side of the house.

“Shit,” He mutters under his breath and approaches the kid like he might a terrified animal. “You okay there, Will?”

Will says nothing, but he nods. Jim feels like he should push the subject, *wants* to push it, but then he hears the door swing open.

Joyce. Jim immediately backs away.

“C’m on, Will, come inside,” Joyce gestures for Will, and sends one last death glare Jim’s way.

He waits until they go inside and slam and lock the door behind them, before he leaves.

+

Not many people looked like El in the Lab. Most of them were men, like Papa. They called each other “he” but they called her “she” or sometimes an “it.” She didn’t like being called “it.”

But the men like Papa had short hair like her too, and that was fine. Papa explained to her that it would be dangerous with the electricity to have long hair. They had to cut it, he told her. Or else she could get hurt. She trusted Papa.

Then one day, Connie started working. Even before Connie murdered Benny, El never liked her. Connie had a cruel face and mean eyes, and often suggested to Papa that she needed more time in the small room. Connie is bad.

But Connie had longer hair than El did. And she was a “she” too. When other women started at the lab, none of them had hair like El’s, and El didn’t like it. She wanted their hair, with its curls and shine. Especially when the men and the women would talk together, and the men would say, “Darling, you look so pretty today.” She wanted hair to put in styles, like the braid Lisa would wear, or just longer than shaved. She wanted to be pretty.

“Papa,” She said one day as they pulled out the scissors. “No cutting.”

“Excuse me, Eleven,” Papa had said, like he couldn’t hear her.

“No cutting,” She said it a bit louder this time, and covered her hair with her palms, as much as she could. The hair was not even that long. Just an inch. She had a ruler, she counted it. She would be fine in the Bath, she was sure of it.

He took her hands from her head and held them down. “Eleven, you know that’s dangerous. No. We must cut your hair.”

She started to squirm, fidgeting in his grip. “Papa, no-”

“Fine, we can put you in the Room,” He said, now pulling away from her. The lack of touch became a void inside her. “And maybe you’ll be grateful for the care we give you-”

“Papa,” She begged and, this time, reached for him. He coldly turned from her and snapped his fingers, and the doors flew open with a boom. The men in white entered the room and grabbed her, so she immediately struggled. “Papa! Papa!”

But he didn’t stop them, he let them throw her and lock her in the room.

The next day they shaved her hair off once more.

El wakes with a start, under the blanket fort in the Upside Down. This dimension's radio is now completely crushed from her sleeping grip.

Guiltily, she stands and decides to go back to the school instead of staying in the fort. Hopefully, soon, she'll be in the real thing, in the real world.

+

Steve hates this weird lab. It smells like disinfectant and bad memories, even though he's never actually been there before. The pristine areas and the filtered air remind him of his house, specifically his father's office. It's barely been a month and the place already reeks of his father.

Nancy is clung to his side, and it kind of makes him feel badass. Like, she knows he can protect her.

Jonathan on the other hand is as far away from them as possible in the hallways they roam. Not surprising, since Byers has been into Nancy for years. Not that Nancy has ever noticed.

Steve doesn't really have time to dwell on it before they reach the office of "DIRECTOR OF AFFAIRS - DR. MARTIN BRENNER STEVEN HARRINGTON". The door is locked, but he doesn't hear anyone on the other side. His father is probably being a dick to the other scientists somewhere else.

Without a word, Steve pulls out his car keys and goes for the one marked with duct tape.

"What are you doing?" Jonathan hisses, but he immediately goes to block him from any suspecting eyes. Steve already knew that the hall is empty, but he appreciates the solidarity.

"Breaking in, duh," Steve says casually and opens the door. "Well, not technically, since nothing was broken."

"That's not how it works-" Nancy starts to say, but she goes quiet at

what they see.

The office is covered in pictures of the monster from security cameras, so they're black and white and grainy and blurry, but very recognizable. There are Post-it notes and various scribbles of notes and theories, he thinks. Most of them aren't his dad's handwriting, which doesn't really surprise him because his father rarely does actual work.

Nancy, with total authority that kind of turns him on, says, "Everyone take a wall and try to take down as much information as you can."

They each listen to her and Steve studies everything and tries to retain what he can, noticing the main things: "alien?" "The Dark Region" "missing presumed dead" "Where is it from?" "Four flaps, no eyes?" Mostly theories, but the fact that the scientists who discovered it and know about its existence don't know jack shit is not reassuring.

"It looks like the place where the Demogorgon is from has what appears to be radiation in the air," Jonathan says.

"It seems like they believe that's where it gets its powers," Nancy says, standing on her tip toes.

"Like comic books?" Steve checks. "*Superman?*"

"Maybe?" Nancy says, unsure. "Mike doesn't read Superman comics."

"Wish I had my camera," Jonathan says. "I'm bad at just remembering stuff."

"Well, remember what you can," Nancy says, nicely but no-nonsense. "We should get out of here soon."

"Yes, you should." Collectively, they spin around, faced with scientists in white lab coats and blank looks on their faces.

Steve clears his throat, "Um. Hey... Dad."

+

Mike sighs and looks at Dustin, "More food?" Seriously, it's worse

than last time. Bags of chips, chocolate pudding containers, things of Pringles, like three fruits, Nilla wafers, and more stuff. It's like a mountain of candy and junk food.

"Um, *of course*," He says, like Mike's an idiot. "We don't know what El's energy levels are going to be when she gets back, she needs food, for *sustenance*."

"He has a point," Lucas says, crossing his arms. "Especially if there's a Demogorgon on the loose."

Mike sighs. "You're right, you're *both* right," He says, and they both smile at him, and he's glad he has these two as his friends. And Will too, and he's sick but still important. "We definitely need that stuff. I'll take some stuff from my kitchen too."

"What do you think Will can bring?" Lucas asks, adjusting his backpack.

"He seems really scared about this," Dustin points out, "Let's just hope he shows up."

"And feels better," Mike adds.

"Yes," Dustin points at Mike, as that means something. "That too." He whirls on Lucas. "What'd you bring?"

"Snuck into my dad's safe for more of his 'Nam stuff," Lucas carefully pulls out the now-familiar wrist rocket, camouflage bandana and binoculars. "*And* I also grabbed this baby."

Lucas pulls out a closed pocket knife.

Dustin is not impressed, "You had an *actual* knife before."

"Yeah but we can't take that into the dance, dummy," Lucas says. "Besides, when the Demogorgon attacks, we'll have a weapon besides El."

"Besides El and the wrist rocket," Mike adds, mostly to make Dustin roll his eyes and Lucas smile.

“Damn right,” Lucas grins.

But then Dustin goes, “Aw shit.”

“What now?” Mike turns to him.

“We have to wear *tuxes*,” Dustin says, exasperated.

“Shit,” Lucas huffs.

“I mean, we don’t really have to, El will probably still be in Nancy’s dress so we probably won’t have to dress up-” Mike tries to reassure them but Dustin rolls his eyes.

“El is *your* date, but Lucas and I need to dress to impress the other ladies at the dance.”

Mike stammers, “We just kissed, but that doesn’t mean we’re dating-”

Lucas and Dustin gasp loudly. “You *kissed*?” Dustin is grinning wide.

“*Ew!*” Lucas makes a face.

“When? Where?”

“*Why?*”

“Oh my god, shut up,” Mike says at them, trying very hard not to blush. “We’re not talking about this now, let’s just focus on the mission. For example, I’ll bring my SuperComm to try to find El.”

“Don’t you mean your *giürrrlfriend*?” Dustin asks.

Mike throws a pillow at him.

+

Joyce sits down next to Will on his bed after getting him all situated and feels his forehead, it’s clammy and sweaty. “Oh, sweetheart,” She says. “Let me get you a wet towel to dull the fever.”

“Mom-” The word is shaky and he grabs her hand. His grip is weak but she still lets it stop her from getting up, so now she’s hovering

over him by his bed. “D-don’t leave.” His mouth is trembling, and he looks like he might cry.

Joyce swallows and says, “Don’t worry, I’ll just be a second.”

She walks out into the hallway and goes to get a towel from the laundry room to wet it in the sink and braces herself on the edge of the kitchen counter and forces herself to take a few deep breaths.

Will is just under the weather, she thinks and forces herself to accept it as truth. *Boys get sick all the time, this is nothing.*

Joyce turns around and her eyes land on their phone, the third in as many months, and almost slaps at her hands to resist the urge to call Jim. *You don’t call the Chief of Police for a head cold*, she scolds herself and grabs a bottle of DayQuil and heads back into Will’s room.

She sits down at the foot of his bed and pours some of the medicine into the cap. He makes a face but drinks the whole thing and goes into one of his coughing fits.

“You should try going to sleep,” She says, rubbing at his knee under the covers. But he keeps coughing and he reaches over and grabs his trash can.

“Mom, can I have some privacy?” He asks through the coughs, his voice rough and interrupted throughout the sentence.

Joyce stands from the bed, then hesitates. “Are you sure, Will?” He looks so awful and pale, and every urge is telling her to stay even though she has a shift starting in half an hour. “Maybe I can-”

“Mom! Go, please!” He makes a hacking noise and, this time, she listens, because he probably feels uncomfortable about his sickness.

Outside of his room, she can hear him gagging and coughing and she winces. She wants to respect his wishes, but she shouts through the door, “Jonathan will be home soon, I’ll leave a note!”

“Okay,” He says, his voice weak but audible.

Joyce still has time before work so she lets herself rest against her

paneled walls for a moment. She just needs to catch her breath. He's not dying. He just has a cold.

Resisting the urge to slap her face a couple times or smoke a cigarette, she goes back to her closet to change into her work outfit. She will mother him when she gets back.

Even if he doesn't want her to.

+

Jonathan has never been escorted from a secret (kind of) laboratory before. In a twisted way, it's fun. But mostly terrifying and dangerous.

The guards don't hurt them and let them off with a warning since they did technically have the food and the permission from the outside guard. After hearing Will's friends and the Chief talk about what happened to them, he genuinely knows that they got off easy. Especially since they still remember the information, hopefully. But what the scientists don't know, won't hurt Jonathan and his friends.

Just like when they entered, though, they're watched as they exit the grounds. He can see the cameras trained on them, and on other places, but mostly them. He has to resist the urge to walk with his hands held up so they know he has nothing up his sleeve.

"My dad's gonna be so pissed at me when I get home," Steve sighs, mostly to himself. Nancy and Jonathan share a slightly incredulous look, because that's not really the point of this whole thing, but then Jonathan casts his eyes sharply away. He doesn't need to be doing that, at any moment, but especially not this one.

"Speaking of home," Nancy starts once they officially leave the property and walk back to the car. "We should be heading right back. But I think we should meet up during lunch and get more of a plan."

"Why do we need a plan?" Steve says. "They don't know where the *thing* is, but that doesn't mean it's coming anytime soon."

"That's why we need a plan, in case it does," Jonathan says. Steve looks apprehensive still, but Nancy just grabs his hand.

“It’s just to be safe,” Nancy says as they approach the car. “Besides, you saw what was on the walls, all the information that even *they* don’t know. We need to protect people from it.”

“Agreed,” Jonathan says, because she’s right. He would hate for what happened to Will and Barb to happen to anyone else.

“Agreed,” Steve says, but he’s focused on unlocking the car.

In the car, Jonathan watches as Steve and Nancy are holding hands over the consoles and wishes he had his music so he could block them out. So instead, he stays in the back and looks out into the forest.

+

The time is coming. It gets stronger. One more day.

The eruption.

Soon.

+

Thursday, January 12, 1984

I want to walk in the open wind

I want to talk like lovers do

I want to dive into your ocean

Dustin is actually excited for the Snow Ball tomorrow night. He’s always loved dancing. He’s good at it, and it’s fun. Plus, they get to see El again.

Yeah, she tried to get naked the first time they saw her, but she’s saved his life and his friends’ lives like ten times. She’s a superhero.

Lucas and Mike are walking down the halls next to him, bickering about proper “wrist rocket technique” and whether such thing exists

but Dustin doesn't really care. He wishes Will wasn't home sick, because at least he'd be willing to talk about Dungeons and Dragons or the monster.

As the three walk past the Audio Visual room before lunch, Dustin stops in his movements. There's a weird light flickering inside the door.

Mr. Clarke is supposed to still be in New York with his girlfriend. And no one else uses that room.

Without a second thought, Dustin immediately grabs onto his best friends' jackets and tugs them back with him, causing them to nearly fall on their asses. Luckily (or maybe not, other people falling is super funny) they remain upright.

"Dustin!" "What the hell!"

"Guys, shut up," He snaps at them. "I think there's something in the AV room. Something *otherworldly*." He says the last word like a secret, like a code, and he feels like a spy.

They immediately quiet in understanding, and look around the hallway to make sure no one's paying attention, and then look back at the door. The door is shaking ever so slightly, but none of them are touching it.

Dustin shares a nervous look with Lucas, but Mike is already going for the door and jiggling the handle. It opens.

It's supposed to be locked.

"Are we going in?" Dustin asks, but the matter already seems settled when Mike opens the door wide and walks through. Curious, both himself and Lucas walk inside.

The Ham Radio is pulsating and crackling, and Mike sits down in the chair as Lucas shuts the door. Dustin flicks on the light.

Slowly, Mike reaches for the microphone and speaks into it, "El? El, are you there?"

Just crackling. Pure static.

“What if it’s the Demogorgon?” Dustin panics. “Will said there were constant flashing lights-”

“The Demogorgon is dead,” Lucas says, grabbing onto his shoulder. “El killed it.”

“*Mike?*” Like the other night, her voice is coming through. But now it’s so much clearer. Before it had interference, and now it’s like a phone call. “*Mike?*”

“El! I’m here, can you hear me?”

“Yes.”

“Are you okay?” Mike is clutching the microphone so hard his already pretty pale hands are paper-white at the knuckles. Dustin, worried for both Mike and El, moves closer. So does Lucas, so they’re both flanking Mike in the chair.

“Yes,” El says, and then she speaks up again, “*Mike. Dustin. Lucas.*” They all look around each other, like how could she know it was just the three of them? But Dustin quickly attributes it to her super powers. “*The Demogorgon. Still there.*”

The three boys all share a look, and Mike speaks into the microphone again, “Still where, El?”

“*With you.*”

And Lucas screams.

+

Jonathan isn’t sure when lunch became a club for the three of them to talk about monsters, but he’s fairly certain he has no objections. “Since it’s attracted to blood and if it’s there at the dance, we should draw it again,” Nancy says, chewing on carrots while curled up against Steve and across from Jonathan. “I know there’s nothing definitive but I have a bad feeling something’s going to happen soon, and I like the idea of being prepared. And if we bring a knife, we can

make the marks and protect ourselves if we need it.”

“I feel uncomfortable bringing a knife to a school dance,” Jonathan says. He’s Lonnie Byers kid, and a known social outcast, along with having a record with the Hawkins Police Department after his fight with Steve. It could go poorly for him if they get caught, and he has a feeling that Chief Hopper won’t be so lenient when they tell him it was a for a monster this time. Plus, they might be able to slice their hands beforehand anyway.

“If it’s just a pocketknife then it’s safe, according to school guidelines,” Steve says. Nancy and Jonathan both send him a look. He shrugs and says with a slight smile, “If you want to break the rules, you have to know ‘em first.” Nancy laughs as Jonathan swallows down his ill feelings about the knife, and his bite of ham sandwich.

“Ok, I’ll bring the pocketknife,” Jonathan says. “What else should we bring-”

“Shit!” Nancy curses, and exhales sharply. Off of their confused and concerned looks, she explains, “I just realized, I don’t have a dress for the Snow Ball.” She turns to Steve, pushing her hair out of her face. “Wanna come to the mall with me after school?”

Jonathan focuses on his sandwich again. He’s happy Nancy’s happy and he’s happy they’re all friends, he just doesn’t need to hear about Date Night. That’s a bit too much.

But that’s when Steve speaks up, sounding a bit off, “Actually, my dad kind of grounded me because of the Lab... shenanigans, so I promised I’d help around the house tonight so I could make the dance.” Jonathan watches as Steve sends a regretful look Nancy’s way.

“Oh, okay,” Nancy says, picking at her lunch with her fork.

Jonathan looks at her, and sees how let down she looks. Before he really knows what he’s doing, he says, “If you want company, I-” They both look up at him and he loses his nerve.

But then Nancy looks at him in an entreating way, like she wants to hear what he wants to say. So he restarts, "If you want company, I can come with you. I don't have work this week." His boss said he was taking too many shifts earlier this week and won't let him work until Sunday so he doesn't have to pay him overtime or full-time wages.

She smiles softly, and he feels more like he made the right call offering, "Yeah sure, that'd be great."

"That works well," Steve adds. "Hope you guys have fun." Then Steve looks at Jonathan then pulls Nancy a bit closer and smiles back down at her. And Jonathan can't even fault him for that. If Nancy was his girlfriend, he'd do the same.

+

For the second time in a week, Karen pulls up to Joyce Byers house, which is not the norm. She has nothing against Joyce, it's just usually it's their kids that hang out. Not them. Karen has friends in the PTA and Joyce... And Joyce has her sons, and- Oh. She has Hopper.

Smiling to herself, Karen decides she made the right call of going to Joyce about this. Everyone (except perhaps Joyce) knows that Hopper has a sweet spot for her. She'll know how to handle him.

She knocks on the door, carrying a tupperware of cookies because it's always easier to get invited into someone's house when you're carrying food.

"Hi, Joyce," Karen greets once the door swings open.

"Hey, Karen," Joyce smiles and lets her in. She's been looking much better since her son disappeared and came back, much healthier and calmer. She's glad to see it.

"Thanks for letting me stop by, I know Will is sick, I just needed to-" Karen pretends to just notice the food. "Oh, do you want a cookie? I figured I'd bake some goodies for the chaperones."

"Sure, thanks," Joyce takes an offered cookie and then gestures to the dining room table. "You said on the phone you needed something?"

Do you need me to chaperone later than I had signed up for?"

"Oh no, nothing like that," Well, not really. She knows that Joyce doesn't want to embarrass Jonathan so she doesn't want to stay late. But she does need someone, though Joyce isn't who she had in mind.

"I was actually hoping if Chief Hopper could cover," Karen says, "I know you two have gotten close lately."

"We haven't," Joyce says, somewhat sharply.

Karen almost winces, "Sorry, I wasn't trying to imply anything."

Joyce exhales and they look at each other, "No you're fine, but- what about Hop?" Karen takes the hint.

"I was hoping you'd know..." Now she felt stupid. But she needs the help, so she continues, "A good time to reach him. I don't want to call the department with a non-emergency, you know?"

"Yeah, I understand," Joyce says, taking another outstretched cookie. "I'm sure if you just stop by the station, Flo will make sure he talks to you. Flo is a fan of yours."

"Oh, fantastic," Karen says, smiling. It's always nice to hear that people like you.

"Probably later in the morning," Joyce continues, "He comes in, but prefers not to talk to people without a few cups of coffee in him. You're more likely to get a more... positive," She says after landing on that word, "Response from him."

Karen nods, accepting that as reasonable and good advice, while also planning on mentally when to leave Holly with Ted. "Good to know, thanks Joyce. Well, I'll get out of your hair"

She pushes herself to stand, and out of politeness, her friend does as well. She takes out some cookies to leave for the Byers boys, because they're both sweethearts, and after she finishes setting them on a napkin, she turns to go for the door.

Joyce speaks up and says something, but her voice is quiet.

Karen genuinely almost doesn't hear her and turns back around, "Sorry, Joyce, what was that?"

Joyce takes a deep breath but then says, "He likes brownies. Big fan of 'em."

She doesn't completely understand until Joyce's eyes flick down to the tupperware in Karen's hand. "Oh," She's caught off guard, and then she smiles. "Thank you, Joyce, I really appreciate it."

"Happy to help, Karen. If I don't see you sooner, then see you at the Snow Ball," Joyce smiles at her.

"I hope Will gets better," Karen adds as she leaves, "And take care, Joyce."

Joyce just smiles back

Karen gets into her car, placing the Tupperware on the driver's seat as she gets the car to start so she can get home, because it looks like she has some brownies to make.

+

Thankfully for Mike and his friends, Dustin slaps a palm over Lucas's mouth. Mike is too busy clutching the microphone to help.

"We don't want anyone in here," Dustin says emphatically, and Lucas nods. Still, unsurprisingly, Dustin doesn't remove his hand. Mike can see Lucas's vaguely annoyed look in his eyes, but he can't bring himself to separate them.

"Safe?" Eleven asks, sounding concerned.

"Yeah, we're safe, promise," Mike says into the machine, he doesn't want her to worry about him. She should be worrying about finding a way out of there, and saving her energy. "What do you mean, 'with you?' Are we in danger?"

El makes a noise, and Mike isn't really sure what it means. "Don't know," She says after radio silence. "*Make you safe. Promise.*"

“Who will?” Mike asks, not sure what’s going on. “Who will make us safe?”

“Me,” She says. *“Bad Men are still there. Stay away.”*

“No problem,” Dustin says. Finally, Lucas elbows Dustin and they start play fighting.

“Are you safe in there, El- guys, shut up!” Mike hisses at them, needing to understand her. He can’t if they’re distracting him.

“Dark. Cold. Bad. But no monster,” She answers, she sounds scared yet strong. He looks towards his friends anxiously, and they both are looking at the radio with concern. *“One more day, Mike.”*

“I’ll be here, El,” He says into the microphone, “Promise.”

“Mike, be safe-” And then the sound cuts out and the door rattles. All three boys spin around and turn to see their English teacher at the door, holding a key.

“What do you think you’re doing?” She asks, frowning at them.

Mike and Lucas are struck silent, but luckily Dustin isn’t. “Uhhh opening curiosity doors?”

+

Joyce sighs to herself as she leaves Will in the bathroom after getting home from work. Even though she’s seen him sick multiple times, she’s respecting his wishes to be alone as he throws up. He’s getting better, from what she can hear, but he still sounds bad.

Unsure of what else to do in the free time, along with a need to go outside, she decides to let the dog out. In doing so, she sees the lights in the shed on.

Confused, Joyce walks over, crunching in the light snow that still remains from the previous night. She wishes she had some sort of weapon in defense, but since she doesn’t, she has to rely on the element of surprise.

The door is unlocked, so she forces it open and finds Jonathan hammering nails into old bats of Lonnie's forced baseball career on Will.

"Jesus, Jonathan, what are you doing?" She asks, oddly terrified but minutely impressed by the pile of other bats. It's only two others, but still, she had no idea he could do this. Or had before.

Oh wait, he said he used this on the monster back in November. Something sinks inside her as she jumps to the conclusion, is there another monster? Does he know about the slug? Does he know something she doesn't?

"Jonathan!" She screams it this time. But no reaction.

Probably because she's so used to seeing them on, she didn't register that he's wearing his headphones. Sighing, she waves her hands around, because Jonathan completely blocks out everything when he's listening to music.

He looks up and sets the hammer aside, taking off the headphones. Even from the distance, she can still hear the music.

"What are you doing?" Joyce asks again, lowering her hands now that she has his attention.

Jonathan looks down at the bat and back up at her, having the decency to look sheepish. "Hammering nails into bats."

"Jonathan Alonzo Byers," She full-names him, and she can see it worked with the way he freezes. "Now is not the time to get snippy with me."

He winces and sets everything down. "I have a bad feeling something's gonna happen this week, and I- I just wanted to be prepared."

"A bad feeling?" She moves closer, curious. "Like what?"

"I don't know. Honest," Jonathan pleads gently, and she trusts him. She raised honest boys. "But after everything..." He trails off. She doesn't expect an answer but then he says "I trust that feeling. So I

felt the need to do something.”

“I can understand that,” She says. “You’re all good, Jonathan.”

He smiles at her.

“But your brother is sick, and it’s getting late-”

“Shit what time is it?” Jonathan says, starting to scramble.

Joyce is confused by the sudden change. “I don’t know, like 7:45-”

“I have to go meet Nancy,” He says, and takes off, and suddenly everything makes sense.

Her poor boy.

With a sigh, she calls for their dog and goes back inside.

+

“I really appreciate you coming with me,” Nancy says as she and Jonathan walk through the store. Most of the dresses are on clearance, which makes her happy because she doesn’t need to spend hundreds of dollars on a dress for one night.

“Happy to help,” He says in his quiet way, hunched over. Nancy finds herself looking at him. He’s dressed in simple black clothes, just a t-shirt and jeans in one shade, and his tall yet crooked form looks so out of place amongst the fluffy, colorful dresses. She smiles, but then focuses.

“I also wanted to talk to you about the information we found about the m-Demogorgon,” Nancy says, going through the dresses. Some are a bit too simple, or too extravagant, but she quickly finds five dresses that seem like they would work. “Is that okay?”

“Yeah of course,” Jonathan says, finally looking her in the eye. They head over to the dressing rooms. They go to the one closest to the mirrors at the end, with a platform to stand and examine yourself, along with a couple of chairs for those tagging along to sit in.

"I'll try to be quick," Nancy says, hanging the dresses up before she closes the curtain on Jonathan.

"No rush," is all he says, and then she closes the curtain.

Four dresses in, she thinks this might be the one. It's a great purple color that works with her hair, and it's soft. Plus, she's ready to give this up and get back home.

"So they found samples of its skin after they cleaned the school," Nancy continues the conversation about their discovery. "And it said something about it not being 'typical Earth compounds'."

"Do you think it's an alien?" Jonathan asks through the curtain.

"I think that's what they think," She says diplomatically. "But that seems a bit too easy."

"Easy?"

"Yeah. Because of course they can write it off as an alien," Nancy explains, wiggling into the dress. It's not too loose and she can move around in it if need be. "They're all about writing it off placing the blame on others. Hopper told your mom who told me that the State Troopers were scapegoated in the whole thing with Will."

With that, Nancy steps out of the dressing room and goes to the mirror. Jonathan stands beside her and they both look at her reflection.

To break the silence, she says, "You're the photographer, does it work?"

He nods, and says, "You look great."

"Thank you," Nancy says, her voice soft. But then, before she really registers it happening, she starts to cry.

"Oh god," Jonathan says, panicked, and turns to her. If she wasn't suddenly emotional, she would be laughing at his scared reaction. "What's wrong?"

Her mouth opens and she can't vocalize it at first, but then it hits her. "Barb should be here." And it feels stupid and childish but she starts crying harder in the dressing room.

Immediately, he pulls her into a hug and just says, "She should."

And, oddly enough, it's the perfect thing to hear.

+

Jim must be a sucker for pain because he dug through the deepest recesses of his shitty-ass "attic" (a hole in the wall of his trailer that probably is not up to code) where he keeps his Indianapolis life and found the scrapbook his ex-wife made and is now looking through it.

Good thing there's no booze in his Indianapolis Attic.

The scrapbook was made early in Sarah's diagnosis, before she lost her hair. She was so scared about losing it, she made him and her mom take dozens of photos to preserve her then-current look before the chemotherapy took hold. He tried to tell her she was beautiful, with or without her hair, but he's not sure she ever believed it.

Sighing, Jim continues flipping through it, letting his fingers run over the bric a brac and the photos in their protective plastic wrappings. His ex was always so careful about not smudging photos, while he never really cared. But he doesn't take them out now.

Memories come flooding back to him, things about Sarah that he had tried to force himself to forget. The way she smelled, the way she laughed, the way she cried when she was told she only had two months when she really only had one.

Jim wipes at a tear he didn't realize he'd shed and keeps flipping through, even though a part of him wants to stop. To put everything back, and pretend like he never opened this wound again.

Nearing the end, he pauses at the sight of his daughter bald and pale from the chemotherapy, something he hasn't seen outside of memories in years. It's a candid photo, the two of curled up in a hospital bed as he reads to her. He can't even remember the specific time, he did it so often. And he definitely doesn't remember Diane

taking the photo.

He wipes at his face, hating the tears there. He hates that he's still a pathetic mess over everything, and he almost misses being numb.

He's about to close the book when he looks at Sarah's face once more and thinks back to what Joyce was saying about Sarah and the girl being more similar than he realized.

He hasn't seen Eleven, outside of some pictures from the times he's been interviewed by Hawkins Lab bastards, but he sees what she meant. But it's outside of the obvious similarities, the baldness and the big bright eyes, even if they're completely different colors. It's the way they carried themselves, the way that fought through everything they'd been through, but also the way he wants to protect them.

Jesus.

Jim goes to his sink and splashes water on his face. That- he didn't really think all that stuff. Did he?

Flopping back on his sofa instead of his bed, thoughts and flashes of the past flicker through his brain of everything he was pushing aside, thoughts of Eleven in that weird kiddie pool, exhausting herself to help out people she didn't really know.

He thinks back to his fight with Joyce. He called her an experiment. A weapon. But she suffered at the hands of a scientist known to ruin people's minds, and saved his closest friend's kid.

Exhaling sharply, Jim pushes himself to stand and throw on his jacket and shoes. He has an apology to make.

+

Jonathan locks the front door behind him and turns to find his mom smoking in the kitchen.

"Mom," He says, only half-admonishingly, until he sees her shaking as she looks up at him. Immediately, he sits beside her. "What's wrong? Did something happen at work?"

“Will is still sick,” She says, “I- What if it’s the Upside Down?”

“It’s not that,” He grabs her wrist, trying to calm her down. “The gate is closed. And kids get sick all the time, it doesn’t mean it’s the end of the world.” Smoothly, he takes the cigarette from her fingers and puts it out.

She takes a deep breath, running her hands up and down her arms, “You’re right, absolutely right. You always are.”

He chuckles a bit, “Not always. You should go to bed, you have work in the morning and the chaperone stuff tomorrow night.”

“Do you mind that I’ll be at the dance?” She asks. “I don’t want to embarrass you-”

He shakes his head, “Not at all, Mom. You should go to bed, I’ll check on Will.”

She pats his cheek and then stands, “You’re good, Jonathan” and then she pads off to her room.

A bit confused, Jonathan goes to his room and grabs a mixtape he had made when Will was in the hospital but never got to show him, and then he grabs some paper and crayons from the kitchen counter.

Knocking on Will’s door, he says, “Hey, Will. Can I come in?”

“Yeah,” His voice is weak through the walls, but the more pressing thing is that he didn’t ask (even jokingly) for a password.

Jonathan walks in and sits at the foot of the bed. Will is pale and sweaty, completely engulfed in blankets, even ones from their mom’s bed. “Sorry you’re sick.”

“It’s okay.”

“Wanna listen to music? I made a new mix,” He holds it up in two fingers.

Will goes to answer, but then he’s coughing. It’s longer than the other ones, and Jonathan frowns in concern. He goes to ask him what’s

wrong, to check on him, but then Will gags and then says, “Can I-” He coughs repeatedly again. “I just be alone?”

“Yeah, sure,” Jonathan leaves the tape on Will’s bed and exits the room. Suddenly exhausted, he flops on his own bed in his room and waits twenty minutes.

The tape doesn’t get played.

Sighing, Jonathan decides to just go to bed, not even feeling like listening to his own music.

+

Joyce is so tired. Work kicked her ass, Will won’t talk to her, and Jonathan is holed up in his room. She’s just about to change into her “pajamas” (an old shirt of Hopper’s and sweatpants) and go to sleep but she hears a signature knock on the door. She automatically jolts in surprise. She clutches at her heart for a moment, takes a deep breath and looks through the peephole, and she’s taken aback at who she sees.

A huge part of her wants to ignore him, but she doesn’t want him to keep knocking so then the boys go to get the door. Jonathan and Will never had a problem with Hopper being around, and she’s not interested in one starting just as she’s kicking him out of her life. Well, for at least the time being.

Yet, she opens the door, for reasons she’s not completely sure of.

“It’s really late, Hopper,” She says, sighing as she leans against the doorframe, a clear signal to not come in.

“I know, and I’m sorry,” He looks a bit ragged, but he always looks a bit ragged. Actually, now that she’s really staring at his face, he looks worn down. She hasn’t seen him like this since after he moved back from Indianapolis. That would make her feel guilty if she weren’t so angry. “I just had to talk to you-”

Joyce looks up at him, “I’m really tired-”

“I’m sorry,” He gets out before she finishes her sentence. “I shouldn’t

have done that to the girl- Eleven,” He corrects himself at the last minute. “I was just tryin’ to help you find Will, but I went about it the wrong way. And I promise to make it better, just- please forgive me.”

“Hopper,” She starts, and then she crosses her arms and sighs. She can't think of anything to say to him. She hates to think that he was the one that put those kids in danger, that he did that to *children*, but she also hates that he saw her as weak, someone who needed to be acted on behalf, rather than with. And that he never told her.

Instead of being filled with unparalleled rage, she's... exhausted. And insulted.

“I don't think I can forgive you right now,” She says the words slowly, like she's still piecing them together. Because she kind of is, she doesn't want to do this but feels like she has to. “All I can picture is that scared girl, who put herself in a terrible situation to find my boy, being hunted down by the people who tortured her because you lead them to her.”

She can't look at his face. “Joyce-” He starts to say but she interrupts him.

“I think you should go,” She says. Against her will, she looks up at him and sees his jaw is clenched.

“I- alright, Joyce, if that's what you want,” He sounds so defeated and, helpless to do anything else, she watches as he gets in his truck and drives away.

Only when the lights are so far away they're gone, does she turn back into her house and lock the door.

+

Friday, January 13, 1984

Cause we've shared the laughter and the pain

And even shared the tears

You're the only one who really knew me at all

Jim is sitting at his desk in his office alone, craving a drink. But he clenches his AA chips in one hand and finishes a load of reports of minor break-ins that are going unsolved. Most people would write it off as teenagers, but he's gonna give it some more once-overs before he passes it to Powell.

Someone knocks on the doorframe and his head jerks up. Expecting to see Joyce, he's a bit disappointed to see Karen Wheeler, standing there with a plate of brownies and her Homecoming Queen smile. Quickly, and hopefully without getting noticed, he tries to not look emotional in anyway.

"Hello, Chief Hopper," She says, "Mind if I sit with you? I have a quick favor to ask you."

The brownies smell damn delicious, even through the tupperware. If they weren't there, he would have sent her packing. But those brownies... He can at least see what the favor is.

"Yeah sure, Karen, come on in," He closes the file and gestures for her to sit down. She does, but keeps the plate on her lap. Dammit, now he can't snatch one. "What's the favor?"

"Mrs. Duffer had to go out of town this morning, a family emergency," She starts, settling in. "And, unfortunately, they can't be a chaperone for the Snow Ball as scheduled. So I'm short, and I was wondering if-"

"I could sacrifice Callahan or Powell for you?" He asks, interrupting because he has a feeling where this is going. And it's *not* what he just suggested.

Watching her closely, he sees how she casually (a perfected casual) pulls out a brownie, then a napkin, and places the brownie on the napkin on his desk. So well-executed.

The smell is stronger now, and his mouth practically waters. Especially since his breakfast was only a cup of coffee because

Callahan forgot to pick up donuts on the way in this morning. Oh shit, those are homemade. Karen Ann Murphy Wheeler has never half-assed anything, especially desserts, in the entire time he's known her.

"Actually, Chief Hopper, I was hoping you'd do it," She says, moving back in her chair like she's getting comfortable. Like she's getting ready to be there a while to make him change his mind.

He raises an eyebrow, "Are you bribing a police officer, ma'am?"

She has the decency to look a bit ashamed, but he can see the fact she's amused. "Not at all," She says. "You get the brownie whether you say yes or no. I just had heard from Joyce-"

"Joyce? What'd she say?" He practically blurts out.

Karen raises an eyebrow.

"I mean," Fuck, how do you pull that back? He can't think of a way, so he gives up. "What'd she say?"

Karen shrugs, a fluid movement, "She didn't say much. Just that she hopes to see you there. If you *were* to show up, of course."

He has a feeling that isn't true, but who is he to argue with brownies.

Pointedly, Jim takes a bite of the brownie, keeping eye contact with Karen. After swallowing, he says, "Yeah, I'll do it."

She beams, a genuine smile not a Homecoming Queen one. "Thank you so much, Jim, I really appreciate it."

"Just leave the times with Flo and I'll be there tonight," Jim says, eyeing the tupperware of brownies.

Karen leaves the entire case with him, causing him to raise an eyebrow in slight surprise. "You can give that back to me tonight," She says, of the tupperware. "I'll get out of your hair. Thanks again, Hop."

"Happy to help," He says, but he's reaching for another brownie as he

does it.

She waves and then he's left alone in his office.

+

Mike hates suits. It's only his church one, not even a special one or a new one, he wears this at least every two weeks, but he's hitting a "growth spurt" or whatever and it's just uncomfortable. But at least he didn't have to go shopping.

His mom is gonna drive him to the dance, but she's freaking out because his Dad left on a last minute business trip so she's trying to find a sitter for Holly so she can still chaperone the dance.

Since she's distracted, he loosens his tie and sneaks downstairs to the basement.

It's empty, as expected since Will is home sick and Dustin's mom is driving him but Mike's mom is also driving Lucas, but he's not here yet.

Mike sits down in his normal chair at their table out of habit and looks through to see if he needs to bring anything with him to help El. He grabs his SuperComm, with brand new batteries in it, and places it in his backpack safely. After a split second of thought, he grabs his compass and shoves it in his pants pocket, even though Dustin is probably going to bring his.

He looks at the fort, not the for the first time since November, but the first time he's done it and smiled. El's going to be back there tonight, he knows it.

An idea hits him, and he frowns a bit. But then he shrugs to himself and gets off his chair to go sit under the blankets.

Mike feels pleasantly small under there, safe. He wonders if that's why El liked it so much, or if it was just comfy. Because it is. Super comfy. But he likes to think the feeling played a part too.

Even though he's not sure she's there in the Upside Down or if she could still hear him even if she was, he pulls out his SuperComm and

takes a deep breath. Calmed, he says, “El. I-It’s Mike. I’m leaving for the Snow Ball in a few minutes. And- I’ll see you soon, okay? You can come back and live with us and everything will be great. I promise.”

A bit nervously, he twists the SuperComm in his hands. It comes to life suddenly, but it’s not El’s voice. “*Mike? It’s Lucas, I’m already in your room but you’re not. Where are you? Over.*”

“In the basement,” Mike answers, crawling out of the fort so it doesn’t get damaged. “But I’m heading up. Over and out.”

“*Over and out.*”

Mike closes the SuperComm up and sighs, allowing himself to look once more at the fort. “Soon, El,” He says. Then he winces at how stupid he is and jogs up the stairs.

+

Joyce only has one decent dress, which she wears to funerals only. She’s not in the mood to wear it, so she borrowed a skirt from Karen earlier and throws on her nicest top but her comfiest shoes. If she’s going to be separating irritatingly horny teenagers, her feet are going to be comfortable, dammit.

She knocks on Will’s door, “C’mon sweetie! We’re leaving in five.”

“But mom-” He says through the door, just before the edge of going into a whine. “I still don’t feel good-”

“I know, but I wasn’t able to find a sitter, plus your fever’s gone down. If you’re sick, I don’t want to leave you alone. But if it gets worse, I promise to take you home,” She debates putting on lipstick, since she knows that Hopper will be coming. But just because she has that thought, she swipes on some chapstick instead.

“Okay,” He says, elongating the word.

With a sigh, Joyce walks over to the sofa to sit and shove on her shoes. Karen called just a few minutes earlier to let her know that she was going to have to bring Holly, so she doesn’t feel bad about bringing Will.

“Jonathan! Leaving in five!” She calls out. Like usual, she gets no response, but she has faith he heard her and will be ready. It might be blind faith, but it’s faith nonetheless.

Will steps out, looking a sort of sick dapper that only the zombies in the movies he makes her watch can pull off, but she doesn’t say that to his face, because she remembers being insecure at twelve. Instead, she says, “I appreciate you coming, Will, it just makes me feel safer.”

He coughs into his elbow, “I understand, Mom.”

“Where’s your brother?” She asks, since it’s nearing takeoff time. “Is he in his room?”

Will shrugs. Usually, especially after Will’s disappearance, they’re locked at the hip, so that causes her to frown before she remembers she has no time for this.

Sighing, Joyce calls for him one more time, but decides she should get Will in the car first. After locking up and checking the locks three times, she finds Jonathan walking from the shed, carefully carrying three baseball bats that are filled with nails.

“What do you think you’re doing?” She asks.

“Just taking a precaution.”

He looks so sincerely nervous about it that her whole body just deflates. “Fine, just... don’t take them *into* the school, okay?” She does not want to get that phone call.

He makes a face, “Of course not. And, um, thanks for driving. You look nice.”

She can tell it’s kind of a distraction but she’s too tired to deal with it. “In the car, let’s go.”

+

Nancy feels a bit ridiculous as she steps out of Steve’s car. Most everyone else is wearing different, shinier dresses and her hair feels weird in the curled updo her mom did and she feels like this whole

thing isn't a good idea. She's about to turn to Steve and suggest a movie instead, but he pulls her in close.

"You look beautiful," He says like he can read her mind, but since he can't and he's just being the sweetest, she leans in and kisses him.

"Ew!" A familiar voice says, and Nancy pulls away to see her little brother, flanked by Lucas and Dustin, standing a couple feet away.

She immediately regresses into big sister mode, even though his joke didn't have that much meanness in it. But hey, siblings will be siblings. "Leave us alone."

"You're the ones that are early," Dustin says.

Steve chuckles, "You got us there."

Her attention is slightly distracted as Jonathan meanders up to them, honestly cleaning up nicely. She's seen him in nice attire before, but it finally looks like he wants to be wearing it. "Hi," He greets softly.

"Hey, Byers," Steve greets cheerfully, wrapping an arm around Nancy's waist.

But she's still mostly focused on her brother. Not on Jonathan's cheekbones.

"Why are you guys wearing backpacks anyway? It's a *dance*, y'know?" Nancy asks, crossing her arms, then frowning at the odd feeling of the corsage Steve bought her rubbing against her arms.

She remembers being 12, and how boys never wanted to dance, so she's not surprised her brother and his friends would be that type, but she is surprised that they'd go so far as to bring backpacks.

The kids immediately freeze and something about that seems off. "Uhh just planning on doing some homework," Mike tries and fails to cover convincingly. "Um, nice seeing you, Steve, have fun at the dance, bye!" The trio spins around and heads into the school, walking at a pace just shy of a jog.

Nancy huffs in confusion and turns to Steve, "That was weird. Wasn't

that weird-”

“I’m sure they’re just doing kid stuff,” Steve shrugs, running a hand down her arm to reassure her. She decides to let it go, but then Jonathan speaks up.

“That *was* a bit off,” He muses, and Nancy appreciates the support. “And Will was being weird too...” He trails off then says, “Do you think it has something to do with the Demogorgon? Or Eleven? Or the Upside Down at all?”

Nancy’s instincts to investigate kick in. “It could be. Let’s follow them and find out,” She suggests, feeling the urge to find out the answer. Noticing Steve’s hesitation, she tries to appease, “Well, I mean, it’s a bit early for the high schoolers anyway, so we might as well see what they’re up to.”

“Ah- sure,” He says, “But then I’m getting you on the dance floor.” He lightly tickles her sides and she laughs.

“Let’s go find ‘em,” Jonathan says, and the three of them go into the building.

+

Mike pulls out his SuperComm and then turns to his friends as they find an empty hallway. Dustin and Lucas flank him on either side.

“How are we gonna find El?” Lucas asks, looking around the hallway like he doesn’t trust it.

The SuperComm crackles to life. “*Mike?*” El’s voice says and Mike’s whole body relaxes in relief. There’s static around her voice, but he can hear her just fine. *“I’m in the school.”*

“Easily,” Dustin answers as Mike fumbles with the radio.

“El? It’s Mike. I’m right here.”

“It’s *here*,” She says, sounding worried. “*The Demogorgon.*”

A chill runs down his spine as the three boys share a look of fear.

“Where? Where is it?”

“The school,” She says. *“Mike, I-I don’t where I am. But in school. It’s here too.”*

“We’re coming and we’ll find you,” He tells her, “Promise.” Then he turns to his friends. “How the hell are we gonna find her?”

Dustin takes the radio and speaks into it, “El, do you know how to play Marco Polo?”

Lucas smacks Dustin’s shoulder. “Are you an idiot? Be serious!”

“I *am* serious!” Dustin snaps back.

“No,” El answers. *“But I can learn.”*

“It’s simple,” Dustin says. “When we say ‘Marco,’ you say ‘Polo.’”

“Okay, I understand,” She says.

Mike sighs, his fingers itching to take the SuperComm back. “How does that help us?” He asks his best friend.

“She’s in here somewhere,” Dustin explains. “We can hear her and she can hear us, so when the signal gets stronger, we’ll get closer to her.”

“Wait,” Mike says and digs into his pocket to pull out the compass.

“Mike, you genius!” Dustin grabs the compass and shoves the radio back into Mike’s grip. Relaxing, he turns back to El’s presence as Lucas straightens up like he’s ready for battle, pulling on his bandana. “Okay, El, are you ready?” He checks.

“Yes.”

“Marco?”

“Polo,” She says as they start stepping forward in one straight line. But a crackling starts to appear that wasn’t there before. Right after, the compass jumps from facing North to facing the South before

going back.

And with that, they step backwards and walk around the school carrying a SuperComm and a compass, trying to find their missing friend.

The compass is starting to get more and more direct, when he feels a hand get placed on his shoulder.

And their screams fill the hallway.

+

Jonathan jumps back at the three kids who look terrified of them.

“Jesus, guys, it's just us,” He holds up his hands placatingly, nodding his head to Nancy and Steve. They relax immediately, so he puts his hands in his pockets and feels the pocketknife and the lighter he brought. He forget to bring it up with Nancy and Steve so he just brought it. Plus, it means his mom doesn't have it so she can work on quitting.

“I *knew* you were up to something,” Nancy says proudly, and she looks so adorably pleased. “Now, what are you up to?”

The three boys share a look but then a new voice comes through on the SuperComm. “*Mike? Still there?*”

Jonathan shares a look with Nancy, then looks back at the kids. “Was that Eleven?” He asks.

“Her name is El,” Mike corrects him. “And she's here. Well, in the Upside Down's evil reflection of here,” He tries to explain

“We're trying to find her,” Dustin adds.

“*And the Demogorgon,*” She says, her voice very matter of fact.

“What?” Nancy asks, looking pale.

“What the hell?” Steve seems to agree with Nancy there.

"The Demogorgon is back," Mike says. "El said so."

"*It's here,*" She says, sounding a bit worried. "*Bad.*"

"What's going on?" A new voice joins them and they all jump around.

Thank God, it's just his mom and brother.

"Nothing-" Lucas starts to say but then Dustin elbows him and says, "El is communicating with us. And she says the Demogorgon is in the school."

His mom's eyes go wide, "I- you're talking to Eleven? She's alive?"

"Yes," El's voice is clear, albeit with a bit of static. "*Alive. Stuck in the Upside Down.*"

Will starts coughing and Jonathan winces. He doesn't like that his brother has to hear about where he was captured for an entire week.

"How can we find her?" His mom asks.

"We've just been playing Marco Polo," Mike admits.

"And chasing the compass," Dustin shakes the device in his hand. "She's stronger than the magnetic pull from true north so we've been seeing where that takes us."

"Well let's go," His mom says. "Besides, it's always better to be fashionably late for a dance."

The kids look confused, but Nancy and Steve look to be in agreement. Jonathan, personally, likes being early as a general rule, but he's willing to give that up to find the girl who helped save his brother.

"Marco" and "*Polo*" resound in the otherwise silent hallway, the seven of them walking to follow the compass needle's direction.

"*Polo,*" El says, her voice only slightly marred by minimal static as they approach a science classroom.

"This is where she fought the monster last time," Dustin says, eyes going wide.

Mike goes to open the door but it only jiggles without opening at all. "It's locked!" He kicks the door.

"What the hell is going on here?"

And they scream in pure surprise.

+

"Jesus, *please*, stop screaming, they can hear you in the gym," Jim says, wincing at their fading shrieks.

He doesn't look at Joyce. Even though he feels her presence there. He always does.

"What's going on?" He studies their guilty faces.

The two Wheeler kids share a look while Will Byers coughs violently. "We're trying to find El," Nancy says. "The girl from Hawkins Lab. I- They- We think she's here-"

"We *know* she's here," Mike corrects, giving his sister a glare. "We've tracked her and she's talked to us with this," He holds up the radio. "But we can't get into the room."

Jim weighs his options. The scientists said that if he heard of any contact with Experiment 011, he was to report to them immediately.

But fuck those guys.

"One moment," He goes to the door and picks the lock.

"Should the Chief of Police be doing that?" Jonathan asks.

Jim spares him a glance, "Would you rather wait for a teacher to come over and ask questions?"

That shuts him up.

The lock clicks open, and Jim jumps as the weird radio in the

Wheeler boy's hand starts transmitting, "*Bad. Bad. Bad.*"

"What's bad, El?" Mike asks, frowning as they walk in. Jim forces the door open and leaves a chair to prop it in case they need to book it out of there

Jim is looking around for any sign of the girl, as is everybody else, when John Sinclair's boy goes, "Holy shit."

Jim looks to where he's looking, and completely freezes.

The chalkboard is completely translucent, like it's gone to glass, revealing a dark mirror that is the Upside Down.

But standing in the middle is girl with a slightly bleeding nose.

+

"El!" Mike screams for her, shoving the radio in his backpack as he goes for the board that now looks like a window. He's pictured the Upside Down and has had vivid nightmares about it, but his dreams were wrong. The real thing is much worse.

But that's not the point now.

"El, are you okay? How do we get you out of there?" He hits his fists against the chalkboard to try to get her out. Lucas and Dustin soon join him.

But she's not looking at him and his arms fall limply by his sides, since that was pointless anyway. She looks terrified and she's pointing to something behind him and keeps repeating "bad" over and over.

"What's going-" He starts to say as he turns around, and then he's struck silent.

Will is standing alone in the back of the room, and he's starting to cough. Like rough, sandpaper, hacking sounds. Then he gags and a dark black slug falls out of his mouth.

"Oh my god!" Mrs. Byers screams, her hands flying to her face. Mike

falls against the wall in pure shock.

“What the-” Dustin starts to say but then Will coughs again and the violently familiar hand of the Demogorgon slithers out of his best friend’s mouth and reaches for them.

Oh shit.

+

Joyce chokes on a gasp, terrified to her bones as she watches a horrifying thing crawl out her son. It's *moving* and it's *alive*. Her poor baby.

“Will! Oh my god-” She dives for him but an arm suddenly wraps around her and pulls her backwards. Immediately, she thrashes against it but the person is much stronger than her. She looks up and sees Jim. “Let me go! Will!” She keeps moving.

“Stay still, dammit!” He shouts at her as the lights start flickering violently.

“What the shit?” Steve Harrington shouts from other the side of her.

“Let me save him,” Joyce tries to throw Hopper off her but he won’t let her go.

“Joyce, trust me, here,” He pulls out his gun and she grabs at his elbow.

“No, please, not my Will, don’t shoot him,” She begs amidst the chaos, no longer kicking against him. “*Jim-*”

“I wasn’t going to shoot him,” He bites out through his teeth, almost sounding exasperated, as the monster continues to pull out her son. It doesn’t look possible. It’s *not* possible, but she’s watching it with her own eyes. It’s like a horror movie, but so much worse.

“Please,” She begs again.

“Fine, but stay behind me,” He gives her a harsh look that makes her recoil a bit. She takes a shaky breath but hides behind him, just

wanting her boy to be okay.

+

Nancy looks around for a weapon, but there are only desks in the classroom. She can hear everyone around them screaming, mostly Dustin and Mrs. Byers, but it's near-deafening. She looks for her brother, who is grabbing onto Lucas in shock. Jonathan is standing still in a corner, seemingly frozen. Joyce is in the Chief's arms, trying to get out.

She, herself, is standing stock still. She has no idea what's going on, or how to react to it. She needs to do something, but she can't.

"Nancy!" Steve's shouting for her, grabbing her elbow. The electricity of his touch shakes her from her reverie. "We need to get out of here-"

"No, we can't leave," She says. "I- I have to fight it." She can't explain the need, but it's there. It's *overwhelming*.

"Nancy-" He starts to say but she keeps looking around the room for something when she lands on El, standing in the windowed board, looking terrified.

A weapon.

Nancy grabs one of the nearest chairs and picks it up and bashes it against window. "El!" She calls to her, and the girl jumps. "Please, we need your help-"

"What the hell are you doing?" Mike interrupts, shoving at her. "She's *scared* and you're making it worse."

"We need her help," She snaps at him then turns to El, who's staring at them wide-eyed.

Oh hell, she is scared.

Hit with a sudden rush of guilt, Nancy drops the chair to the side and places her hand on the chalkboard. It feels like cold metal, but she doesn't pull her hand. "El, please, we need you."

Mike goes to speak but then El says, “Yes.”

“I- El, are you sure-” Mike starts to say but El just lowers her head a bit and suddenly goes from being a terrified child to someone terrifying.

“Hide,” She orders.

“What?” Nancy and her brother ask at the same time. She drops her hand as the wall starts to pulsate, mimicking the same beat of the lights around them.

“Hide,” Eleven orders. Nancy grabs everyone she can, really just Jonathan and Steve, and pulls them away from the chalkboard, and she watches as Mike does the same but in the other direction, taking down Dustin and Lucas with him. The Chief follows suit, Joyce stumbling behind them as they’re divided between Will and the monster and then themselves.

That’s when El starts to scream.

+

Mike covers his ears because the sound is surprisingly sharp through dimensions, but watches as another arm reaches out of Will. It’s so gross but he can’t tear his eyes away.

Until the chalkboard shatters to pieces and El’s voice goes from dark and slightly muffled to bright and completely clear, and then his focus is entirely on her. He gets hit by some shards, one might have even cut his face, but he doesn’t care. Especially as he sees her familiar shoes step down from the hole in the wall and step onto the ground.

Looking up at her, he can see her nose is bleeding already, reaching her lips, and her ears are bleeding too. But she’s zeroed in on across the room.

The Demogorgon snarls at them from deep inside Will and the entire room, maybe even the *whole school*, shakes knocking them all backwards into the wall. Like an idiot, he manages to hit himself in the face.

El is the only one who remains standing and twitches her head to the side and the Demogorgon, including Will, is thrown through the doorway. He winces at the sight of it happening to his best friend, but he doesn't have too much time to think on it because she walks after it into the hallway.

"Shit," The Chief says, and they all scramble to stand and chase after it.

After shoving through the door, they're all helpless to watch as El screams again and throws Will, with the monster still inside him, against the wall.

Before he knows what's happening, the two start to shake and then Will has collapsed on the floor and the Demogorgon is growling at them across the hall, completely separated.

Mike watches as it's all about to be over, as El is about to end it, but then she falls to the floor.

+

Steve is against the lockers. He can only watch.

Jonathan and his mom run for Will and pull him away as Nancy's brother and his friends do the same to the girl with the shaved head. He has no idea what he's seeing.

"Alright, shit," The Chief says, and Steve thinks that's fair to say. Then he starts pointing at people while drawing his weapon. "Kids, get Eleven to safety." Immediately, Dustin picks up the girl and they run off. "Joyce, Jonathan, get Will to the hospital, *now*. Steve, Nancy, go tell the students and chaperones to get out of here."

Steve goes to run, but Nancy is still behind him, staring after Jonathan and his family as they carry Will down the hallways.

"What are you doing? Let's go," He says, gesturing to the gym, to the people who have no clue what's going on, and who need to be informed.

"I-" She closes her eyes a moment then looks at him fiercely. "I'm

staying here, I'm fighting this."

Steve nearly chokes on nothing but spit as he splutters out, "Nancy, what the hell-"

"Go," She tells him. "I'll be fine."

He winces as bullets start flying and he sees that she means every word. After a quick hesitation, he points at her and says "Keep yourself safe" and goes to run to tell the students about the monster on the goddamn loose.

+

Joyce fumbles with her keys as her oldest son holds her youngest, tears blurring her vision. The parking lot is filled with cars but empty with people, but her only concern right now is to get him to safety. He looks so small but she felt his heartbeat and pulse. He's alive, but very cold.

Finally, the car is opened and she slides into the driver's seat. Jonathan, with Will resting completely slack on him, opens the side door one handed.

"Give me the keys," Jonathan says after placing Will in the passenger seat. Joyce, who had reached over to buckle Will in, looks at him in confusion.

"What? Why-"

"I need to get those bats."

Nodding, Joyce, hands shaking, gives him the keys and she anxiously sits and shuts the passenger door. She winces as she faintly hears gunfire in the distance under the sounds of the band playing, and then the nearby sound of the car trunk slamming.

Carrying three bats, Jonathan leans over to the window. She rolls it down. "Make-" His voice breaks slightly so he starts over, "Make sure he's safe, okay?" He hands her the keys, then adjusts so he's carrying two bats in one hand, and one bat in the other.

She nods. “Al-Always. And Jonathan? Stay safe too.” She needs both her boys. She doesn't even want to think about what she'd do without them.

He nods right back at her. “I'll find you at Sacred Heart in a few hours, okay?”

“See you, Jonathan,” Joyce says, and she starts the car. And as she pulls out of the parking lot, she hopes to God that this isn't the last time he sees him.

+

Nancy has no weapon and she feels so useless, but she'd feel worse running away. She's not a coward. She's fighting for Barb, for her family, and for herself.

“Jesus, kid, I told you to get the hell out of here,” Hopper snaps at her, pulling her away from the monster who charges at them as the gun in his hand clicks empty. They hide in between the doors and the hallways.

Nancy presses herself flush against the wall. “We're not bleeding, it's not interested in us,” She reminds him. “Besides, I'm useful.”

He scoffs slightly as he reloads his revolver. “Yeah? You and what weapon?”

Just then, the door is kicked open and Nancy sneaks a look over at it. Jonathan is standing with three nail bats.

Oh thank God.

Nancy runs for him and he hands her one of the weapons. “I thought you'd be with Will,” She says, getting the bat into a good position to prepare to strike, standing beside him.

Jonathan gets into a similar stance as the monster slowly turns on them.

“And miss this?” He says with that slight smirk he gets, reminding her of the time they loaded up the trunk with their supplies, about to

go “monster hunting.”

Looks like she’s about to go monster hunting again, and oddly enough she’s smiling.

“C’mon, kids, dammit, let’s go!” Hopper suddenly shouts at them and without any further prompting, Nancy charges at the Demogorgon.

+

It takes both Mike and Lucas, but they force the stuck, heavy cafeteria doors open. Running inside, Dustin places El against the wall gently.

“Quick, we need to make a fort to hide her,” Lucas starts grabbing things to protect them. Dustin quickly helps, but Mike just leans down next El and sits right beside her.

Her head is lolling to the side, resting against him now that he’s there, and her eyes are closed, but she’s no longer bleeding. “Hey, El,” He says softly. She doesn’t immediately wake up, but he didn’t really expect her to. “I- it’s Mike. I guess you remember me and stuff, but I wanted to be sure.”

Her eyes open, dazed, then settle on his face. “Remember you,” She repeats quietly, but then her eyes close again and she relaxes on him once more.

“You’ll be okay,” He says. He finally sees specific details about her, rather than just her and the fact she’s back. Her hair is longer than the shaved head she had before, but still short. Her bones are more noticeable, as her shoulder is bony pressed against his. She’s a bit taller than he remembers, and she’s covered in dirt and grime. “We’ll keep you safe, I promise.”

“Shit, I think I hit the floor too hard,” Dustin says in a pained hiss, fingers touching his bruised cheek, but then he turns away from the fort and focuses on him and El. “Is she okay?”

“I-I think so?” Mike says, not sure what to say about Dustin’s bruise. “She’s breathing, but I think she’s just tired.”

"We should let her sleep," Lucas says. Mike notices that his friend's lip is cut, bleeding slightly. Blood trickles down near Mike's own eye, but he just wipes it with the hand that's not close to El so he doesn't wake her.

"She needs to eat," Dustin says, but Mike shakes his head.

"Lucas is right, she needs sleep, we'll feed her later," He says.

Dustin nods, but then he says, "Guys, that was the most badass thing I've ever seen."

"Will had a *monster* inside him for *two months*," Lucas says, giving Dustin a look.

Dustin is silent, but then says, "But still, it was awesome."

+

Joyce starts pacing in the hospital room. She told the doctors the entire truth, too stunned to think of a lie, and she keeps looking out the glass windows to see if a doctor is going to come in. It's been fifteen minutes, and so far no one has entered.

She shudders and wraps her arms around herself and looks down at her boy. He's never looked so small and frail and it physically aches inside her to see him like this.

Nurses haven't even come in. No one has taken vitals. She's only sure he's still alive because she keeps checking his pulse herself.

She's going to check again when the door opens and she spins around, immediately offering herself up as a human shield.

She doesn't recognize this doctor and she knows most people in Hawkins. She's gone to the same family doctor since she was three and she used the same man for her kids. This isn't him.

"Who the hell are you?" She asks.

The man offers a smile that makes her nervous. "Hello. These facilities aren't equipped to handle what happened to your son, so

we're going to take him to Hawkins Lab."

"No way in *hell*," She snaps at the smug doctor.

"Listen, Mrs. Byers," He says like he has a million better things to be doing. "He's going to the Lab whether you're awake for it or not. But I'm sure you'd rather be able to watch over the proceedings." She watches as his hand taps a syringe in the pocket of his white jacket.

She's still glaring but now she's filled with fear. Not sure of what else to do, and wishing she had someone else with her, she holds up her hands and says, "Fine. But I'm coming with you. And you better damn make sure that I'm awake for the whole thing."

Again, he smiles and she has to resist the instinct to sneer at him. "My pleasure." He opens the door wide and a group of scientists with a gurney walk in. She watches, pained, as they transport her boy onto the gurney and she follows them outside the hospital to the ambulance marked "HAWKINS HOSPITAL."

Taking a deep breath, Joyce sits next to Will, still cold to the touch, and rides to Hawkins Lab.

+

Jonathan wishes they had a bear trap, but so far they seem to be doing some damage against the Demogorgon. Chief Hopper has even taken one of the bats, since he and Nancy kept shouting at him that bullets do nothing to harm it, and they're all swinging after it. It's not bleeding, or even seeming to do any equivalent of bleeding, but it keeps yowling in pain every time they hit the chest or face.

With the lights flickering constantly, it's hard to aim exactly because it blends into the darkness. But he's mostly just trying to hit it at all, and not Nancy or the Chief. Plus, he was never that good at baseball, to his father's chagrin.

But he doesn't matter. Especially not right now.

"How did you beat this last time?" Hopper shouts as he bashes the bat into its face, sending it backwards.

The Demogorgon charges at Nancy but she swings and hits its arm as it reaches for her, causing it to fall back into the lockers across from them. “El did it!” Nancy says, wildly. “That’s what Mike said.”

“How?” Jonathan asks, never having been told the whole story. The monster doesn’t get up and he takes the second to breathe, letting the bat touch the ground with a loose grip on it. His arms already hurt. He should consider working out, maybe.

“Is it dead?” Nancy asks instead of answering his question. She’s watching the monster, her brown eyes wide, so he looks too.

Suddenly, in a flicker of light, it disappears entirely.

Jonathan swings his bat back up and looks around as the lights stay on. Where did that bastard go?

“What the-” Hopper starts to say, but then he’s picked up and thrown down the hall, sliding into the doors face first like a bowling ball. The lights start flickering on and off again. Jonathan sees a flash of eerie black, but then it’s gone just as quickly as it was there.

Jonathan and Nancy immediately huddle back to back, spinning around, but then the pressure is gone, and he looks behind him and she’s no longer there.

“Nancy!” He calls for her, but then hears her scream from another hallway. It echoes, so it’s pretty far away. Dammit.

Jonathan looks at the Chief, knocked out on the floor.

He winces and goes to try to wake him up, but then Nancy screams out, “Jonathan!” So he abandons the Chief and runs after Nancy, calling for her and trying to find her.

+

Karen is having a great time catching up with Susan Holmes, another chaperone from the PTA with a son in the grade below Nancy’s, when she suddenly hears screaming. Not fun screaming, it’s terrified screaming. They’re saying *something*, but she’s too far away to make out the words. The music cuts, and that’s when chaos descends.

Everyone starts flooding for the doors, now the screaming has multiplied between many people, but she's too confused to really react other than grab Holly and pull her up in her arms to make sure she doesn't get trampled.

"What's going on?" She tries to call for someone to explain, but they're all running away from her. Holly starts to tear up, scared, so Karen rests a hand on the back of her head and pulls her close. "Shh, shh, it's okay, Mommy will fix it," She says to her daughter and keeps looking around for someone to tell her what's going on.

"Steve!" She exhales in relief when she sees Nancy's boyfriend, ushering people to safety. He sees her and immediately runs to her.

"Mrs. Wheeler, you have to get outta here," He says, the words coming out in a rush and he's out of breath. "There's- there's a monster and it's running rampant through the school." Nearby, a student runs towards the doors to the school, but Steve grabs them and says, "No, that way!" and points violently to the doors to the parking lot.

Nothing's making sense to her. A monster? In the school? In *Hawkins*?

"Steve." She tries again.

"It's dangerous, you need to get out of here."

"Nancy. Mike. Where are my kids? Did you see them?" It feels like she's been punched in the gut with guilt. She didn't even know they weren't in the gym already. She has *no idea* where her kids are.

"They're fine, they're still in the school, you need to leave," He grabs her arm but she shakes from his grip.

She opens her mouth to say something, but no words come out. Instead, she walks back through the doors into the school.

Vaguely, she hears Steve calling for her, but she doesn't care. She needs to protect her kids.

Jim rubs at his head, and when he looks down he sees blood on his fingers. It's not gushing, so he figures he's fine. He wipes it off on his uniform, and checks the back of his head. Nothing too sore, and nothing bleeding. He considers it a victory. There's a spare band-aid in his pocket so he feels for the sore spot on his forehead and patches it up.

He goes to stand, and he can stand rod-straight. Thank Christ, the last thing he needs is to be woozy in a fight with a monster from another fucking dimension.

The hall he's in is empty. His best guess is that Jonathan and Nancy (who could probably be a professional baseball player with the way she goes to bat) have lead the monster to another hallway. There's blood, black stuff, and dents across the lockers and the floor down the rest of the way.

Color him impressed.

Since the two teens seemed like they could handle it, he goes to secure the perimeter and make sure any other student or chaperone is out the line of fire. A small part of him wants to go and find the teens, but he only has his gun, and that does nothing against the monster.

Carefully, weapon drawn, Jim goes through the halls. As he nears the main exit/entrance, the screaming gets louder.

It's children and teenagers, who are running toward the exit, but it seems to be the last of them. But another noise gets added to the mix, and it's a loud ambulance siren. But it seems a bit off from the ones he's used to as a cop. He sees lights flashing as he nears those doors to make sure people can still get out safe.

White ambulances, with flashing red and white lights with a blue HAWKINS HOSPITAL on the side.

The town's hospital is called Sacred Heart. Not Hawkins Hospital.

Shit, he watches as a bunch of men in familiar outfits descend from the back. None of them are wearing emergency response gear,

instead dressed in suits that make them look like astronauts, but he already was suspicious beforehand.

Those are Hawkins Lab bastards.

Jim whirls around and goes back down the halls, and decides he needs to look for those kids. So he starts breaking down doors trying to find them. There is no way in hell he's letting them get that girl again. Not on his watch.

+

"We got you, El, you're safe," Mike says, holding her close as she wakes up. Even though this situation sucks, he really can't be happier that she's back and safe. They're still in the cafeteria, hidden behind a barricade of bags of food and desks and chairs, along with the food from Dustin's backpack and the wrist rocket. "All the Eggos and pudding and normal food you want when we get home. I promise."

She smiles softly.

"That was so badass, El," Lucas says, shrugging out of his jacket to give her as a blanket. "Seriously, you saved Will, and all of us. Again. You're so awesome."

She blinks at them. "Thank you," She says it almost like a question.

"Seriously, that was so awesome!" Dustin says, practically shoving pudding into her limp hands. When it falls by their legs, with her staring at it confused, he starts to help her open it. Both Mike and Lucas also start to open more cans of pudding and other snacks they brought. She's ravenous eating them, understandably.

"We'll get you all safe and happy, and no Bad Men or monsters to fight," Mike grabs a paper towel from the nearby supply, damps it with a water bottle, and wipes at the blood on her face gently as she eats. "It'll just be us, all of us, safe."

"Mike," She says, and it might be a question, he's not really sure.

"Yeah?"

“The Snow Ball,” She says, grabbing at his hand. He stops moving, holding his hand by her face, mid-clean. “I promised.”

It hits him. She tried so hard to keep the promise, and something inside him brightens. “You did,” Mike smiles at her. “Friends keep their promises.”

“More,” She says. And he’s about to ask her what that means when the door is kicked down. The sound is loud, but none of them scream in surprise.

“Stay down,” He whispers, grabbing the pocket knife Lucas brought and all three of them move to protect El, shielding her with themselves.

He looks up and sees the Chief of Police, bleeding and dirty. “Chief?” He asks, still in front of El but now relaxing. “What’s going on-”

El speaks up, and it sounds like she says “random” or something but her voice is so soft he can’t hear her.

“The monster is rampaging,” The Chief says, holstering his gun. “C’mon, I can get you kids to safety-”

El whimpers and she speaks up, louder and clearer now, “Lando.” She raises a hand to point at the Chief’s direction, but Mike’s not sure what a *Star Wars* character has to do with this situation.

But then Dustin gasps, “Lando!” Frantically, Dustin turns to Mike and Lucas. Thankfully, Lucas looks confused too.

Since he so obviously gets it, Dustin explains, “Back in November, *he’s* the one that told the Bad Men where El was! He’s Lando Calrissian!”

Mike looks down at her and she nods, and he turns back to the Chief, someone his mother always said he could trust, and sees a traitor.

“You’re not getting her again,” Mike says, moving himself more in front of El. “No one is.”

“Go to hell,” Lucas snarls at Hopper, grabbing his wrist rocket.

Hopper throws up his hands in surrender. “Boys, I’m just trying to help,” He starts to say but then Lucas hits him in the chest with a rock, looking both furious and terrified.

He looks down at his chest and then stares at Mike and his friends incredulously.

“You just hit the Chief of Police using a slingshot,” Dustin says, in a loud whisper.

“*Wrist rocket*,” Lucas automatically corrects, then cringes.

If this situation wasn’t so dangerous, Mike would slap his own forehead in exasperation.

+

Jonathan is freaking out, but trying to remain calm. He has no idea where Nancy has gone, and he’s not sure if his mom and Will are safe. Maybe the most pressing thing is the fact he has no idea where the Demogorgon went and he’s wandering around the hallways with a baseball bat that is filled with nails, utterly lost.

This has been the weirdest year of his life.

He’s cautious by doors and doorways, making sure nothing can sneak up against him or jump out like at a horror ride. He wants to call for Nancy so badly, but he’s afraid of drawing attention to either her or himself.

But that point is shot to hell, because someone just screamed, and it sounds like Nancy.

Immediately, he runs for the sound. He thinks it’s by the English wing. The woman screams again, and just as he skids to the open door, he finds Carol, nose bleeding down her face and her dress torn at the stomach, being thrown against the wall.

Oh shit.

With only slight hesitation, Jonathan charges the creature and bashes the bat into its back. A nail gets stuck in the body as he tries to get it

out to strike again, but the monster takes the opportunity to spin around and throw its weird hand into Jonathan's face, taking a hit to the jaw.

He flies backwards, losing his grip on the bat as he slides against the hallway tiles. Even though the wind feels knocked out of him, he tries to scream, "Carol, run-" but the Demogorgon is completely focused on him now, standing with a bat sticking out its back.

Desperately, Jonathan kicks his legs at the monster, but it just swipes a hand down and hits him in the ribs.

This was so much easier when it was just his tiny house filled with traps, along with Nancy and Steve. Now, he's all alone with it in a completely unprepared environment.

He's never really been one for cursing, but... *fuck*.

"Nancy! Steve-" He calls out, trying to get help, but the monster pulls him up by his shirt and he's trying to move to stand but the monster just throws him backwards.

At the last second, Jonathan covers his head to block from blows but he knows his back is getting covered in bruises.

"Jonathan!" A voice that is unmistakably Nancy's pierces the air, and he gets a second wind while the Demogorgon is distracted.

He dives for the fire extinguisher and bashes the glass case with his suit jacket-covered elbow and makes a new weapon out of it. Hopefully.

The Demogorgon is focused on him once more but Jonathan hits it in the face flap with the butt of the extinguisher.

But then the monster throws a hand out and Jonathan is sent careening back into the lockers, sliding up on the tiled floors so he's basically flat against the wall.

Dazed, he blearily looks up to see the Demorgon breaking through walls, leaving destruction in its wake.

+

Joyce doesn't have fond memories of Hawkins Lab, and this certainly isn't helping. She had promised herself that she'd never come back, but here she is, waiting anxiously with her son in a room that is way too bright and clean. It smells like bleach which only reminds her of the way she poured nearly an entire bottle of the chemical down her sink after she and Hopper disposed of the slug.

Ever since the transport, she and her son have been left alone in a room with two beds. She's tired and she has to use the restroom but she refuses to leave his side. He's still asleep, getting paler, but they haven't touched him or tried to "help" him or even tried to enter. Yet.

And she knows she's made the right decision to stand vigilant when a scientist comes in, and looks surprised to still see her in there.

They recover, "You must be Mrs. Byers-"

"You stay away from my son," She immediately snaps, not afraid to raise her voice because Will has been out cold since they were at the first hospital.

"We just need to-"

"I don't give a damn what you need," She keeps her voice level and cold. "You're not going to experiment on him, I saw what you did to that poor girl-"

The scientist looks shocked at that, "You've seen Experiment 011? *Recently?*"

Joyce remembers what she reamed Hopper out from before, and makes an effort not to reveal things, "Not since the incidents in November. But it doesn't matter, you aren't doing *anything* to my son."

"Ma'am, don't you want-" The scientist approaches the bed.

"Stay away," Even though she's small, Joyce uses her frame to guard Will. "Get *out* of here-"

"You must be Mrs. Byers," A new, suave scientist walks in. The other one steps backwards. This one's hair is dark, and his eyes are practically black. And, against all reason, she wishes Hopper was there beside her. "I understand you have some concerns."

"I don't want any of you touching him," She insists, still shielding her son.

"I completely understand," He smiles, and she has a feeling he's expecting her to be charmed. "But your son, according to our scientists and visual data, was used as an incubus for the past two months. Don't you want people who know how to handle this to fix him?"

"You could make it worse," She points out.

"We could," He says, almost conversationally, like they were at a work party. But he's in the superior position, and they both know it. "But that's not our intention. All we want is a sample of his infected blood for testing and then we will flush his body of toxins, make sure there are no more infestations, and never ask you or your family for anything again."

"Testing?" Joyce repeats incredulously, "You can't expect me to agree to that."

The scientist gestures to Will. Joyce stares at her son, at his thin, small frame, his purpling skin, and his darkened, chapped lips. He almost looks worse than when he came back from the Upside Down.

"I'm afraid you don't have much of a choice, if you don't he could suffer even more side effects than he's already endured."

Confused and scared, she turns to look at Will again, and sees near-black blood leaking from his lips down his face and she chokes on a sob.

"Those include but are not limited to stomach failure, liver damage, brain damage, heart failure-" The scientist continues.

"Fine!" Joyce snaps, feeling cornered as tears well in her eyes. "Fix my boy, but *please* don't hurt him." Against her will, a tear falls.

“You have my word.”

She hastily wipes at her face. “I don’t trust your word, but I have no choice.” And to her sheer reluctance, she signs the form on his clipboard and lets them work on her son.

+

Jesus, this is not going the way Jim expected. Grimacing, he rubs at where the rock hit his chest. It doesn’t even hurt, physically, it’s just a pride thing. And a general what-the-hell thing. Was he this dumb when he was a kid?

“Kids, I need you to listen to me,” He tries a new strategy, “It is dangerous as hell out there, I need to get you safe.” He goes to stand, expecting them to fall into place, but they’re all just glaring at him.

“Bullshit!” The Wheeler boy, Mike, says, still guarding Eleven. Jim stays crouched down. “You don’t care about her, you just want to take her back to the Lab.” She whimpers and Jim winces.

“Look, I-” Jesus. “I’m sorry. I was just trying to save Will, but I shouldn’t have betrayed you. I’m sorry.”

She looks at him with her wide eyes, and he’s struck by the image of his daughter. There’s something about the way children will look at you and expect you to fix it, to be good, when you know you’ll fail. Instead of that filling him with terror and an urge to hit the bottle, he has the overwhelming urge to protect this girl. And even her friends, if they stop hitting him with goddamn rocks.

“Eleven,” He says her new name, not Jane, because that one probably doesn’t mean anything to her. “Do you remember in the woods? The food in the box?” The food always disappeared within two days. The homeless population of Hawkins was practically nonexistent, so she *had* to be the one to take it.

She nods, which confirmed his suspicions, and then looks to Mike, who looks confused.

“I left those there,” He needs her to understand, to know that he’s going to keep her safe. “I wanted to make sure you were safe, so the

scientists-”

“Bad Men,” Dustin corrects.

Jim’s eyes flick over to Curly, then go back to Eleven. “Safe from the Bad Men,” He corrects himself. “I wanted to make sure they couldn’t get to you and that you were getting food, energy. I promise, those assholes won’t get you again.”

Eleven turns to Mike, “Not you?”

Mike, who was staring intently at Jim, looks back at her. “I- It wasn’t. But I don’t- you really want to help?” He has a bruise on his cheek and a cut in his eyebrow and he’s barely five feet but he looks like he’s ready to fight him, which is something Jim has to respect.

“I do,” He says, mostly focusing on the girl.

And she nods at him. He sags slightly in relief.

Lucas wipes at the blood from the cut on his lip. “I don’t trust him.”

“I don’t give a shit, kid,” Jim says casually. Lucas sneers at him. “That’s not the point now. You can hate me, and you don’t have to trust me, but let me get you to safety. I may be an idiot, but I am the idiot who’s the Chief of Police. You guys gotta let me help you.”

They all look at each other, in that secret way that kids do, and then at Mike. Mike speaks up, “Fine. But this doesn’t mean we like you.”

Jim resists the urge to say something sarcastic, and turns back to Eleven. “Can you walk?”

She shakes her head. “Tired,” She explains.

“Kay, I’m picking you up,” He warns her, since she could hypothetically break him in half. He scoops her into his arms. She’s light as a feather, practically. He probably should have brought her more food. “Let’s get out of here.”

“No,” Eleven pipes up, causing him to look down at her. She shakes her head. “Back.”

“Back?” Mike asks. At least her translator is confused too, because Jim had no idea what that meant. “Back where?”

“To the Demogorgon,” She says. “We have to go back.”

“Aww shit,” Dustin groans.

And Jim hates to admit it, but the kid’s got it right.

+

Nancy runs past a hallway, and then doubles back when she sees her mother cradling Holly to her chest, standing still. “Mom!” Nancy shouts at her. “You need to run-” The word is cut off before the wall nearest her family starts to crumble and then debris is everywhere, clouding the sight of them.

She coughs, covering her eyes with her elbow for a moment as she sees the silhouette of the Demogorgon, which has gotten bigger somehow since she last saw it, emerging from the rubble.

She looks for her family and quickly hones in. They’re on the other side, with the monster in between them.

She can’t think of a worse place for her family to be.

“Nancy!” Her mom calls out, coughing violently. But then the Demogorgon stomps its foot and the entire hallway rumbles and they all go flying, separating all of them.

Nancy loses grip on the bat, thankfully flying away from any of her family but also away from the monster which is not good.

Her mom is thrown to the far end of the hallway and separated from Holly, who lands on a perfect seating position on the dirtied floor, but she starts crying.

In the distance, Nancy can see her baby sister sobbing, with a cut on her lip that’s bleeding.

Shit. Blood.

Nancy grabs the bat and breaks into a sprint. “Mom, get her out of here-” She calls out to her mom, charging the monster and bashing the bat into it as it reaches for Holly.

But it just uses whatever supernatural powers it has to knock her back, growling. She hears her mom cry out and Holly continues to sob as the monster reaches for her again.

Desperate and unsure, Nancy decides she has no time to hesitate so she pushes her sore body to stand. She takes the sharp end of the bat and cuts a line with the nail where she can see veins in her inner elbow. It hurts so bad, but she barely focuses on it.

“Hey, you bastard!” She screams at it, goading it. It whips around to look at her with its... eyeless face. “I’m bleeding,” She says, barely glancing down at the pulsing wound in her arm. “And-and more nutritious!” Jesus, she needs to pay attention more in science class.

The Demogorgon wheels on her.

Even though that’s what she wants, *shit*.

Nancy scrambles to walk backwards while still looking forward at the monster. “Mom, get Holly out of here and get yourself safe-” She cuts herself off as she notices her mom is frozen still. “Go! I’m fine, get her safe! It goes after blood! Get Holly safe!”

She pushes at a door, turning around and hoping her mom will listen to her.

The monster chases after her as she uses herself as bait. This isn’t like at Jonathan’s house, she has nothing to throw down in their path to use as a barrier. She only has herself, a bat, and the Demogorgon.

“Jonathan!” She begs for help as she runs. “Steve!”

“Nancy!” Jonathan’s voice comes through the halls, but she’s so distracted that she can’t tell how far away he is. “We’ll find you!”

“I have the monster!” She’s running out of breath but she keeps running.

She just hopes she can find Jonathan before this gets her.

+

Mike can hear his sister screaming for Jonathan, and he picks up his pace as the four of them, five with El being carried, run to find them. She sounds terrified.

“Nancy!” Mike starts screaming for his sister, picking up his pace even if it means losing sight of El. Soon, he’s way in front of his friends and the Chief. “Nancy, are you okay-”

The word is cut short as he runs into a perpendicular hallway and he crashes into his sister.

“Aw damm-” They fall to the ground. He sees a nail bat that almost impales him, but luckily it’s dropped off to the side of them.

“Mike, watch out,” Nancy grabs his arm and pulls him out of the way from the Demogorgon heading their way.

“Shit!” He says, and turns back to his friends as they hide back in the hallway they were just running through. “The monster’s right there!”

“Mike-” El says, but then Hopper speaks up.

“We need to get out of here-” But then the monster releases a sound that makes him want to cover his ears.

“Run!” Dustin shouts, voice cracking, and they all take off in the opposite direction, like *Scooby Doo* running.

Not sure where else to go, they duck behind a trash can. It doesn’t work so well because there are seven of them in a line, but it’s the best they got.

“We’re screwed, guys,” Lucas says, out of breath.

“What do we do?” Nancy says.

Then El says, “Look” and they all look away from the monster and down the hallway.

And their jaws drop.

+

Jonathan was chasing the noises when they suddenly stopped. Confused, he keeps his bat up and then sees lights start to pulse just a little ways away.

He runs down that hallway and finds them all. He keeps his eyes on the monster as he slows to a walk, but a heavy walk. He reaches the trash can but he doesn't look away from the Demogorgon.

The lights flicker incessantly but he grabs the pocketknife from his pocket and flicks it open.

"Guys. Run." With that, he slices the knife against his bicep. It immediately starts to bleed, like a curtain of red against his bruised skin.

"But Jonathan-" Nancy says and she sounds terrified.

He doesn't bother answering her as he swings the bat up and charges at the monster. It falls backwards, and he just beats into it again. It snarls at him but he bashes it into the hallway away from them. He turns around to check on them and they're running into another hallway. Everyone except for Nancy.

"Nancy, get out of-"

And then he's tackled to the ground by the monster. It hoists him up by his neck against the wall, not tight enough that it's trying to murder him straight off, but it's definitely not comfortable.

Then its weird flaps starts going for his arm. His blood.

+

As soon as Karen sees her son, running from the hallway, she sets down her youngest daughter and pulls him into a bone-crushing hug, her hands placing themselves all over him to check for bumps and bleeding. There are a few scrapes on his cheeks, mainly his eyebrow, there's a bruise on his chin, and his church suit is now covered in dirt

and grime but he's walking and he's breathing and he's fine.

"Michael," She says, feeling tears choke her throat. "Oh thank God."

"Mom," He starts to squirm, because he's always been awkward about hugs but she doesn't give a damn. Not tonight. Not forever.

"I'm so glad you're okay," She cups his face in her hands. "Are you okay? Do you need a doctor? Blink twice for-"

"Mom, I'm fine," He insists but she doesn't believe him. Her poor boy, her baby. She hugs him tightly again.

She turns to his friends, "Do you boys need to go to the hospital?"

They shake their heads.

Chief Hopper is with them as well, carrying a small girl with a shaved head. Oh my- is that the girl those scientists warned her about? Is she at fault here?

"Karen, get these kids to safety," He says.

"Go back," The girl in his arms says and the Chief winces but turns around.

Mike goes to say something but Karen speaks first. "You're not going back in-" She asks incredulously.

"I *have* to," He interrupts her. He gives her such an intense look that it send chills through her spine. He points at the kids, "Get them safe." And then he's carrying that girl back down the hallways.

Without any further warning, Karen is herding the kids and forcing them outside.

+

Nancy feels pure fury flow through her veins as she spins around to see that the Demogorgon, once again, is holding Jonathan by the throat. He's turning red and his feet are scrambling for purchase on the floor but he's being suspended by a creature much stronger than

him.

He's going to die.

Without even considering any potential consequences, Nancy uses all the force she can and whacks the monster off of him with a mighty *thwack!*, sending it flying across the hall, through the doors, and into the gym. She doesn't wait for anyone else. She doesn't wait for a safer, better option. She goes after it, bat in hand ready to attack.

The Demogorgon charges for her, and she just winds up and hits it in the neck.

It lets out the sharpest howl yet, falling backwards but Nancy barely flinches and she rears back once more to strike it again, getting it in one of its face flaps.

Nancy is splattered with black gunk but she doesn't give a shit. She tries to bash it down into the ground but it grabs the bat in one of its claws and throws her in the air.

She flies over the monster in an arc, still gripping the bat, and lands on the other side of the gym.

The bat falls a dozen feet away, ripped from her grip, and she's thrown near the doors. She tries to catch herself, but she just feels pain shoot in a part of her left wrist and she can't help but cry out.

The monster grabs her ankle and pulls her down across the floor. Oh god, it's going to take her to the gate.

"Jonathan!" She screams out for him, flailing her body in an effort to get loose but it's pointless. She can't grab any sort of anchor on the smooth floor, especially with her arm injured, and she can't, she just can't. "Steve!" She hasn't seen him since El separated Will and the Demogorgon, and her eyes prick with tears over the fact he could be dead or injured and she'd have no clue.

A voice breaks through her struggles. "Nancy!" It's Jonathan, he's back for her. She could sob in pure relief. But instead she just keeps kicking at the monster and then Jonathan hits the bat into it, and it loosens its grip.

Even though her wrist is in pain, she crawls away so she can get her breath back and get her bearings.

“Is the school empty?” Nancy calls out, pushing herself to stand and go for her bat. She still has her good wrist, but the left wrist is throbbing in pain and she hisses out at the sensation.

“Dunno,” Jonathan says, out of breath as he fights the monster on his own. She finds herself struck by his power and control of his movements. He’s holding his own, and he has before. She blames her arm pain and general dizziness on the fact she can’t tear her eyes away from his arms and the way his muscles ripple under his ripped white shirt.

She’s struck from her dream-like state by the fact he screams out after a hit to the chest, his leg stumbling so he goes to the ground, so she goes into the fray to help.

No one, nothing, is going to hurt Jonathan Byers.

+

Joyce forces herself to listen to the scientists’ procedures and explanations, even though they terrify and confuse her. Again, her lack of college education and lack of interest in science back in high school is her downfall. She owes her mother an apology.

She’s clinging to Will after the X-ray as they prepare for surgery, including an IV that causes her to wince because his blood is near black.

Good news is that there are no more slugs inside him. According to an intern that was patient enough to talk to her, the other doctors probably weren’t looking back in the regular hospital. But she’s fairly sure that they saw but Hawkins Lab told them to leave it alone. Her fists clench, she wishes she caught it sooner. Why wasn’t she a better mother? She should have seen it. Memories of the past two months keep flooding her mind and with this final piece of the puzzle, everything makes sense.

But the scientists start using the words like “toxin,” “infection,” and

“parasitic.” She may not have a medical degree, but she knows those words are dangerous.

“Will he be okay,” Joyce asks, grabbing a scientist who doesn’t look as busy, even though she’s not sure she’s prepared for the answer.

The scientist turns to her reassuringly. Joyce can’t mark down any details of the actual face, only the vague concern. So far, this scientist is the only one with emotion other than skeezy. “Yes, I believe so. We took our sample, and now we can cleanse the blood and remove any parasites or damage left over from the infestation. But your child seems like a trooper, he’ll be fine.” And then she goes back to working.

These Hawkins Lab people are professional liars, and she can tell she’s being placated, but Joyce feels the urge to believe them, so she does. She keeps her place beside her son, holding his hand.

The scientists bustle around them, injecting him with vials that she doesn’t totally understand the use for but pray aren’t dangerous. She starts to cry, tears leaking down her face, but she tries to keep it down.

Then and there, she forces herself to remember to drive all the way to Chicago for another hospital visit for him, to make sure that the scientists haven’t done something. Maybe Hopper will drive-

Joyce scrunches her eyes shut for a split second to force that thought to stop and then focuses on Will. She needs to focus on Will.

“You’ll be okay, Will,” She says, grabbing his limp hand in hers. He’s still unconscious, but she hopes he can hear her, or at least feel her there. “I’ll keep you safe. No matter what.”

But that’s also a warning to the scientists around them; she hopes they hear it too.

+

El is drowsy. She is tired. But that doesn’t matter.

Once inside the gym, she doesn’t immediately focus on the monster.

She sees the shiny things on the ceiling, the silver strings and white all over. It looks like the white halls of the Lab, but much warmer, more safe. More good.

And she feels how warm Hopper is. There are pens and pins digging into her side from his body and outfit, but that doesn't bother her much.

But then she looks to see Nancy and Jonathan beating the Demogorgon, and it is shrieking and suddenly it throws a hand out at them and they smack into each other, tumbling to the floor.

Nancy is Mike's sister. She is pretty and she is kind. Jonathan is also pretty and kind.

Without a second thought, El wriggles from Chief's grip. He's still carrying her, looking at the chaos before them.

"Eleven-" He says, like he wants her to stop. She glares at him (no powers, just a glare) and he quickly lets her go, but still gentle. Soft.

Her head feels heavy, and she knows she is already bleeding from her nose. But she has the energy for this.

She focuses that energy into separating the Demogorgon from Jonathan and Nancy. She safely guides them behind Hopper as she goes towards the monster, which is now against the wall, like he was back when she was banished down into the Upside Down, back when she left Mike.

The Demogorgon is fighting against her grip, and it might honestly beat her. That cannot happen. She must protect Mike, his family, his friends. She needs the monster weak, small.

"Fire," She tells the others. She knows they have fire, she smells the smoke. The smell reminds her of the time the Bad Men wanted to test her endurance, and to see if she could put fires out with her mind from various distances. She can, but that isn't what she's going to do.

She hears a gun cock, and she winces as the bullets start flying. None of them hit her, but they remind her of when the Bad Men tried to

hurt Mike in just a few hallways away and when they hurt Benny in the burger place.

“No!” She yells it at them. She tries to yell it over the sound of the monster screaming and the fire of bullets. But they don’t hear her, so with a twitch of her neck she causes the gun to jam. It’s difficult, since most of her focus is on the Demogorgon, but it is important.

“No,” She says it again, still holding the monster against the wall. It strains against her, and pushes against her energy and she might buckle soon. But she refuses to.

The three, still holding their weapons, all stare at her in confusion. The monster screams out and she bares her teeth and forces it against the wall harder.

“*Fire*,” She says it as clear as she can, willing them to understand even though she could not explain it as well as Mike can.

Nancy and Chief look confused, but Jonathan immediately drops his bat and reaches into his pockets and grabs a weird rectangle. He flicks it open, a fire erupts from it. Then, he throws it at the monster.

Good.

It twists and turns and howls against the force she’s pressing against it and the fire surrounding it, and she suddenly realizes something.

She’s going to win.

+

Will wades through the dark to find the light. It’s a hard journey, but then it’s there. It hurts his eyes, so accustomed to the darkness. But he welcomes it and forces his eyes open.

His mom is resting her head on folded arms, sprawled next to him in the hospital.

He blinks away the brightness until he's used to it. He's groggy and feels just as bad as when he was back from the Upside Down. Maybe even worse.

The room is empty except for his mom, and he can see doctors and scientists walking past the wall with a giant window in it.

“Mom,” He says, and it comes out like a croak. He almost expects to have the familiar feeling of one of the slugs crawling up his throat, but nothing. Not even a cough.

She jolts awake, and immediately her hands are on him. “Will? Are you okay? Did anyone come in-”

He shakes his head. “We’re good, I swear.” But then he starts to cry.

“Oh honey,” His mom says, and he can see her crying. He *hates* making her cry.

“I lied to you, Mom,” Tears are falling down his face and he feels like a dumb baby. “I told you everything was fine, and that I wasn’t hurt, but I *knew* but I couldn’t control-” He can’t continue and just keeps crying.

She doesn’t say anything at first, which terrifies him. He’s ruined his family and his mom’s happiness and it’s too late. He’s a monster, a terrible monster.

But then she crawls into the hospital bed next to him. It’s a larger bed than the one from the time in the hospital back in November, and they both fit comfortably even though he feels terrible.

His mom cups his face in her hands and forces him to look at her.

The tears are blurring his vision but he can see she’s still crying.

“William David Byers,” She says, using her thumb to stroke his face. He has to force himself not to lean into it. “This is not your fault. I promise you.”

“I knew,” He says, because she’s wrong she has to be. “It- the monster made me lie, made me have the slugs, I couldn’t-”

“It’s not your fault, baby,” Her hands pet at his hair and he lets out a sob. “The monster was controlling you but you’re good. You’re so good and I promise you, nothing can get you again.”

“Do you still love me?” Will asks, his voice breaking. He doesn't want to know the answer but he needs to, in case he needs to live in Castle Byers for the rest of his life.

“Oh Will, I'll always love you,” She says. “You have to believe me there, sweetheart. Nothing could change that, especially not that, not this. If it takes me telling you every second of every day, you will believe me when I tell you that this wasn't your fault.”

Even though he's not a baby anymore, he leans into his mother and continues to cry. But he feels slightly better, though still dark.

He has a good feeling that the bad feeling might go away soon.

+

Mike feels like a baby, being dragged away by his mother from the school, but more importantly, away from El. “I need to be in there,” He struggles, watching as Lucas and Dustin run up next to his mom and sister.

“I'm not letting you back in there,” His mom says sternly.

“El will save us,” Mike says, and goes for the gym again, but she pulls him back, grabbing his arm.

“I won't let you,” She says, and suddenly he sees the fact she's scared. His mom, who raised him and his sisters and kept him safe and helped him when he was scared, is terrified and crying. “It's not safe,” She just barely raises her voice at him, but Holly starts to cry.

She turns to her, so Mike tries to run again but now she's grabbing both arms. Dammit. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees his friends go to comfort his baby sister.

“Mom, I- I can't lose her again,” He says, begging, *needing* her to understand.

She looks so confused still and he's getting frustrated. “Who?” She demands, “Who is she?”

“She's a hero, and she's in danger-” He cuts himself off when hears

bullets go off from the gym. Then hears El scream.

In a sudden burst of energy, Mike breaks from his mom's grip and books it for El.

"Mike!" His mom, his friends and even his baby sister scream for him, but he barely hears them because he's running for the door and flinging it open.

And he's struck silent by what he sees.

El is magically holding the on-fire Demogorgon up against the wall with her right hand, and he can see pieces of the monster start to fall away as the gym is filled with the sounds of the two of them screaming. His sister, Jonathan, and the Chief are there, but he only registers El and the fact she's in danger.

Mike lunges for her, but he's suddenly pulled into the Chief's arms. He fights at him, but he won't let him go.

"El!" Mike screams for her, but the Chief is like a mountain and he can't fight him.

"She'll be okay, kid," He says, but he won't believe him.

Still struggling, he says, "She wasn't last time-"

The Demogorgon releases a violent howl, but El holds up her left hand. The Demogorgon starts to shake. She then spreads her hands apart, screaming right back at it.

The monster begins falling to pieces.

Mike winces, tearing up, and, unable to fight anymore, turns into the Chief's side, not willing to see her disappear again.

The gym fills with dueling screams and the ground shakes but he doesn't look back. Too afraid.

Time passes, and then the screams stop but Mike's eyes are still closed.

Then he hears a small body hit the floor, and he pulls away from the Chief to see El on the ground.

She's still here.

+

Nancy doesn't know what to do right now. She doesn't know what to feel.

"Shit," Jonathan says, and limps to a fire extinguisher that's just on the ground.

"El!" Mike shouts- shit, was he in the room? When did he get there? She watches, dazed, as her brother grabs the small, brave girl into his arms.

She can feel her own heartbeat slow to a normal rate, and the pain in her arm starts to become more and more pressing as Jonathan puts out the fire against where the monster stood. There are scorch marks all over the floor, but the flames are soon out.

Of course, that's when the sprinklers click on as alarms start to go off and the entire room gets soaked. Shocked, Nancy looks at the blood, black gunk, and ashes that gets mixed with the water. Some of the blood is hers, Jonathan's and the Chief's, most of it is Eleven's.

"El," Mike suddenly says, sounding like he's crying but excited at the same time. She must be waking up. A breath she didn't realize she was holding is released. "She's alive!" He says to nobody in particular it seems, but then Nancy watches as Dustin and Lucas run over. Dustin slips on the water, but they all hug El in excitement, falling into each other.

Nancy looks over and sees her mother, holding a sobbing Holly, staring like she's in a catatonic state.

Someone touches Nancy's elbow gently, and she jumps and sees Jonathan now right beside her. "You okay?" He asks over the alarms, but his voice is still quiet.

She nods. The door from inside the school opens and they all whip

around. It's Steve, who immediately gets soaked. He runs for Nancy, but as he nears her, he slips on the water.

She's fairly certain she hears someone laugh at them. But Steve is grinning from his spot on the floor and she sees him say "Ninja" even if she can only barely hear him.

Nancy safely walks over to him, sitting on the floor, and kneels down. "You're okay, I was so worried," She cuts herself off as he pulls her into a hug.

"I was getting people out of here, to safety, but I'm okay," His hand slides down her arm but she cries out as it both puts pressure on her cut and her sore break.

"Shit," He says. "Sorry."

She shakes her head, "It's okay, I- I'm glad you're here."

They both get themselves standing and join the group. She almost wishes they had kissed, but most of her family is there. That'd be awkward.

She settles for holding his hand instead.

"Is Eleven okay?" Hopper asks, checking on the kids.

"How are you feeling, El?" Mike asks, rubbing her shoulder as she leans against him. Her eyes are dark red, but fading to their normal brown, and Nancy can see her veins popping out purple against the pale skin. Nancy swallows, the girl does not look well.

El says something, but Mike is the only one who can hear her, so he repeats, "She says 'tired but good.'"

"You saved us!" Dustin says excitedly, "Again! You are so good at that!"

"Yeah, please don't stop," Lucas says with a shy grin. El smiles back at him, but it's weak.

"You kids should stop getting in danger," Hopper says, and Jonathan

snorts in agreement. Nancy watches as the two share eye contact but then Jonathan looks away. She keeps that in mind, because he looks a bit anxious. But that could be the fact they just fought a demon monster from another dimension that almost killed them, and took over his brother, but she'll remember to bring it up.

"What," Her mom speaks up for the first time since Nancy's noticed her. "Is going on?" Her voice is lethally quiet and Nancy freezes like she just got in trouble.

And maybe she did.

+

Jim, not sure of what else to do, moves to sit down against the bleachers. His body feels wrecked, he's soaking wet, and he's coming down from a massive adrenaline high. More so, he hates he has no idea how to proceed. He's a man, and he's the Chief of Police, he should know. But he doesn't. The only thing he can think to say is, "Jesus Christ."

"Don't swear," Karen says, admonishing him, like an automatic reflex. He's too tired to fight her on it. He just looks at her and she starts going blurry. Fuck, his head hurts. The goddamn sirens don't help at all.

"Not the time, Mom," Her eldest daughter says quietly, cradling her left arm. Jim appreciates the solidarity, especially surprising since he arrested her boyfriend for beating up her other boyfriend.

"We need to get to a hospital," Karen says, starting to shake, still holding her youngest.

Jim sighs. "We can't, it might be too dangerous."

"What is going on?" Karen says, snapping at him over the sirens. "What was that thing? Where did it go?"

"We don't know," Jonathan speaks up, his voice quiet but heard. "But it should be gone."

"*Should* be?" Karen looks like she's panicking so Jim stands and walks

over to her, taking steps so as to not trip. He puts a hand on her shoulder.

“We’re all alive,” He says, his voice as commanding as he can make it. “There are no grievous injuries. It was terrifying as hell, definitely, but we’re okay, Karen. That’s the important thing.”

Her mouth opens, like she wants to say something but suddenly, the sprinklers turn off, and so do the alarms. Everyone freezes in their movements, except for the kids who help Eleven to a standing position. He’s even distracted momentarily because he wants to make sure she can stand. She can’t, but the boys pull her onto Dustin’s back so she’s getting a piggyback ride.

“I saw Hawkins Labs people earlier,” Hopper says, looking at the three teens because they’d know why that’s bad.

Their eyes go wide. Good, they get it. Instinctively, they all seem to gravitate towards Eleven.

“Why is that bad?” Karen asks, but she moves with them as well.

The door is kicked open and the scientists from before enter. “Stay behind me, and let me talk,” Jim says, moving to the front of the group.

“Where’s the monster?” They ask, weapons drawn.

“It’s dead,” Jim says. “We did your job for you. Let us go.”

“Not possible,” One steps forward, one he doesn’t recognize in his forced meetings with them. “You could have been contaminated. Let us take you to our lab and get you examined.”

“No way in hell,” Nancy says, lunging forward. Jim gently keeps her back.

“We’re not going with you-” He’s cut off when one of the scientists gasps and steps forward.

“Is that Experiment 011?” He asks, and the scientists start to murmur.

"You're not getting her," Mike shouts at them, all three of the boys shielding her.

"Come with us to the Lab," The one who told them about being contaminated speaks again. "We can reach some sort of agreement on the way. But, look, you lot need medical attention. Especially Experiment Eleven. Look at her."

Even though he's seen her, he looks toward her again. She's still pale and her veins are still showing and there's drying, water-wet blood down her face. She looks like a wreck.

Everyone's staring at him to make a decision.

He keeps a hand near his weapon, but he says, "I think an agreement can be arranged."

+

Karen feels like screaming. She feels like breaking windows. She feels like punching all the smug scientists in the face.

She does none of those things.

She instead holds onto her youngest daughter and tries to understand everything as best she can as the Chief of Police, her eldest daughter, her daughter's boyfriend, her son, her son's friends, her own friend, and that friend's son all try to explain what the *hell* she just saw happen in Hawkins High Gym after they were fixed up by said smug scientists.

They're all cooped in a small room after getting medical attention and checking there were no bugs or microphones in the room.

Joyce and Holly are both fine. She herself only had minor bruising when the... *thing* knocked her down. Chief Hopper has a cut on his forehead and some bruising. Joyce's youngest is out cold, asleep on the nearby hospital bed, while Joyce's oldest is covered in small scrapes and bruises, along with a sprained ankle. Steve, her daughter's boyfriend, is wiping blood off himself, but none of it seems to be his, with hardly any bruising. Nancy, objectively, is the most obviously worse off, covered in gashes, a few bruises on her

body, and a broken wrist that already has a cast on it.

Among the boys, Lucas has a split lip, Dustin has a bruise on his cheek, Mike is covered in small scrapes with a bruise on his chin. The girl the scientists were after months ago (the one the boys call El but the scientists call Eleven) is sickly pale and bruising, but that's probably from all the blood that seeped out of her eyes, but looking better. Actually, she and Nancy might be tied, if it were a competition, for who is the most battered.

"So what you're telling me is," Karen begins, her voice much more quiet than she's feeling. "That a monster from another dimension escaped, and my children and their friends, along with the Chief of Police and a girl who was forcibly experimented on with..." She can't think of a word that describes what she saw and what has been described to her, so she goes with Dustin's preferred word, "*Powers*, are the ones that defeated it."

"El did a lot of it," Mike says, looking over at the girl who's sitting with an IV stand next to him. Eleven looks up hesitantly, like a scared bird.

"That's true," Nancy says, looking over at Jonathan before looking back at Karen, "She's powerful and brave."

They all nod. Unsure of what else to do, Karen moves the sleeping Holly to her own original seat and moves to kneel in front of Eleven, who's leaning back nervously like she's afraid Karen will do something to her. No child should live in fear like that. Karen notices her son, practically glued to the girl's side, moves closer, causing her to relax a bit.

Making an effort not to touch her so as not to scare her, Karen looks her in the eye and says, "You saved my children. I can never repay you for that. Thank you so much, you're a hero."

Eleven, or El, looks so confused, but also touched, but Karen's not sure if she's reading that right. And then the girl starts to cry, soft little sobs, and, while Karen knows that she doesn't need a stranger's comfort, all her instincts are telling her that this small girl needs protection.

"I'm so sorry-" Karen starts to say as her son goes to comfort her, pulling an arm around her. Her strong boy, she knows she's raised him well as he does this.

But then El, sniffling, says, "Thank you" to Karen. She takes a breath and then says looking straight at her, "Good."

A bit confused, she starts to ask in order to understand, when Mike explains, "She thinks you're good. Right, El?" She nods, and he smiles at his mom.

"You're safe here, El," Joyce says, rubbing at her youngest son's arm from her chair at his bedside. "We will protect you." They all nod at that.

And that's when a scientist walks in.

+

Saturday, January 14, 1984

Every now and then I fall apart

Turn around, bright eyes

Immediately, Joyce straightens at the sight of the doctor who operated on her son, but then stops moving when Will rustles in his sleep.

"What are you doing back here? Is something wrong-" She can't handle the idea of anything being wrong with him, still.

He speaks over her smoothly, "Your son is fine, Ms. Byers. I just never got a chance to introduce myself to you all. I'm Steven Harrington, the director here at Hawkins Lab." He turns to focus on El, who's shrinking back against the bed.

Joyce, as gently as possible so to not wake Will, gets off the hospital bed. She is now standing between them.

"I assume this is about the arrangement, then," She checks, smoothing down her skirt. Luckily, for Hopper, he filled her in on the fact that the responders in the ambulance agreed that they'd make a decision after some medical attention in exchange for blood work, just like with her son. But, as he told her, that probably wasn't going to be the end of it.

"Karen, Jonathan," Jim says, also standing. "Can you make sure to stay in the room?" They both nod, so Joyce and Jim follow the Doctor out into a nearby hallway. Not too far away, but far enough to not be heard.

"We understand that you found and have Eleven," He says, tapping his fingers on a clipboard.

"We're not giving her up," Jim immediately says, and Joyce has to tamp down the urge to smile. "You're not torturing her anymore. She's a *child*."

The director simply hums and he suddenly looks so sleazy and manipulative, "Yes, she is a child. A child with powerful abilities. She doesn't have complete control of them yet."

"She's taken down an interdimensional monster *twice* while your people haven't been able to do jack shit," Jim says, casually, "I think she has a better handle than you do." Joyce looks over at the tall police chief and, this time, can't hold back the small smile on her face.

"If we don't take her," The doctor tries another tactic and Joyce schools her face to look serious. "You're willing to let her into your homes? Have another mouth to feed? She's a young girl, coupled with the fact she has abilities she doesn't understand. What if she destroyed your house? The people you cared about. You've seen what she's done, and you're willing to house her?"

And that's when Joyce hesitates. She already can barely afford anything even with Jonathan helping out. She's about to say something, not sure what, when Jim speaks again, "Yeah, I'd take her. And I'd treat her better than your predecessor would."

Dr. Harrington winces ever so slightly, “Yes, I was informed of Dr. Brenner’s methods. Since her disappearance and his death, myself and others have been making strides to be more... let’s say amicable.”

“That’s the word you want to go with?” Joyce asks, not believing the bullshit right now.

“Our laboratory invested energy, resources and effort into Experiment Eleven, we had a plan-”

“She’s a child,” Joyce interrupts, crossing her arms. “Were you just going to throw her to the Soviets?”

“We’re not interested in using her for spy tactics,” Dr. Harrington says, and then he sighs and says, “At least not anymore. We’re just involved in the development and assisting in the control of her abilities and interested in being able to replicate that in adults that can give consent.”

Joyce and Jim share a look. Joyce would love to hope they’re on the up and up but she won’t hold her breath.

“How about this,” Jim says, like he’s planning a battle. “I take custody of the kid. She does not live in this lab, she lives with me. Once a month, she comes in for testing, with myself or another guardian to watch over the proceedings to make sure she’s not getting abused.”

“And we’d also like the school to get fixed,” Joyce adds. The two men send her a look. “A portal to another dimension was opened and hasn’t been cleaned up yet, not to mention the damage from taking down the monster *your people* let escape.” She says obviously, then turns to Dr. Harrington. “Your colleagues tried to make me think my boy was dead. You owe me on this.”

The doctor’s eyes flick between the two of them. “I have to run your terms past my board, but I also don’t see why that’s not reasonable.”

“And we’re going to make sure this is okay with Eleven first before anything’s official,” Joyce adds.

At this, Dr. Harrington winces. But he nods. “I’ll let you two know as

soon as I can.” And he leaves them.

“Damn, I should take you into the interrogation room with me,” Jim nudges her with an elbow.

She smiles at him then stammers, still feeling a bit reluctant around him even though she’s not sure why. “I should go check on Will.”

With that, she leaves him.

+

Steve still can’t comprehend anything that happened just hours ago. It’s over, the monster is gone (he thinks, he *hopes*) but every single noise and every flickering light causes him to jolt.

He’s glad he got people out and he’s glad he helped Nance and Jonathan fight the monster back in November but... that was fun as a one time thing. Nancy and Jonathan just stepped up, and he- he froze.

Everything has calmed down a bit and everyone has been checked out and cleared, but Nancy hasn’t left yet but he’s not sure why she’s staying. He looks at her, sitting in a chair, running her fingers up and down her cast. And he makes a decision.

“Hey, um, Nance, can we talk for a second?”

She looks up at him and nods, pushing hair out of her face. He leads her to a far off hallway and sticks his hands in his pockets.

Fuck.

“Listen I- I don’t think I can do this,” He says, trying to find the words but they aren’t coming to him. He’s had to dump people before, but never with someone he (shit, this sounds bad) really cared about.

“Do what?” She asks, eyebrows furrowing.

He takes a deep breath. “Us.”

He winces as he watches what he's saying sink in and he feels like a tool. She says, "What do you mean?"

"I- you were so great with that monster today, and with the stuff at the lab, and back in November," He's rambling so he says, "I can't do that."

"I'm not asking you to," She says, reaching for him but he steps back. She winces and steps back as well.

"Like, what are you still doing here, Nancy? Your mom already left, your arm's been fixed up-" He stops talking and waits for her to answer.

"What are you talking about?"

"Why are you still here?" He asks.

She stammers. It's a simple question, why is she acting like she's put on the spot? "I- I wanted to make sure everyone was okay, Jonathan-"

"Jonathan, exactly," Steve latches onto that. "You and him just went off on that freaking thing together-"

"Yeah, to save the school," Nancy raises her voice then they get glared at by scientists so they both keep it down.

"I obviously can't compete with him, so why don't you just-"

"Oh, bullshit," She hisses at him, and he's taken aback. She takes a deep breath and closes her eyes before focusing on him. He's locked onto her movements, a bit stunned. "You can break up with me, fine, I- I understand, and I won't try to stop you. But don't try to force something on Jonathan and me to make you feel better about it. That's not fair."

Then they're just standing in the hallway silently. And he sighs and runs his fingers through his hair. "You're right, I'm a dick, but-" He inhales and almost stops himself, but because he means it, he says, "I still want us to be friends after this."

Nancy smiles, but it looks small on her face, "I think we can be."

"But... I still think we should break up," He says a bit hesitantly. He means it, but he doesn't want to add to any other trauma she has.

She sighs too, but she rolls her shoulders back once and says, "Me too."

Well.

Guess that's that.

"Take care of yourself, Nance," He says, and then leaves the lab.

+

Mike's mom said he's allowed to stay until 1 in the morning, his strangest curfew ever. But he's really glad his mom said so, because he probably wasn't going to leave that soon anyway.

El is sleeping, curled into his shoulder. She had a talk with the Chief while he was talking to his mom, and he's not sure what they said. But he feels a bit too wound to think on it or to even sleep yet, especially since he won't be sleeping there.

Dustin and Lucas are setting up their sleeping bags and pajamas that his mom nicely brought over because, unlike him, they were able to convince their parents to let them sleepover and he's a little (okay a lot) bit jealous.

He looks over at Will, and his eyes are finally opening. "Guys," Mike says to Dustin and Lucas, and they all peek up from below the hospital bed. "Will's awake."

As gently as he can, Mike removes himself from El and he walks over to the nearby bed as Will wakes up.

"Hey," Mike greets and goes to hug his friend instinctively, but then realizes that might be a bad idea with all his medical stuff. "I- I mean, can we hug you? Are you okay?"

Will bites at his lip, "You guys don't hate me?"

“Are you an idiot?” Dustin says. “Why would we hate you?”

“I- I lied, I got you guys in danger,” Will starts to cry and he immediately wipes at his face. “It made me, and it made me lie,” He says. “I didn’t want to.”

“You had a monster, like, *living* in you,” Lucas says, like Will doesn’t remember.

“We’d never hate you, Will,” Mike says. “You’re our best friend, and we’re glad you’re okay.”

“No more lying,” Will says, like a promise. “And, if you guys want or whatever, you can hug-” He cuts himself off, laughing, as Mike, Dustin and Lucas all throw themselves on top of him.

“You’re really not mad?” He asks from under them.

“Duh,” Dustin says.

“We’re all good, dude,” Lucas says. “Promise.”

“You should meet El,” Mike says, gesturing to the sleeping girl. “That’s El. Or Eleven, but really El. She’s asleep, but you can meet her tomorrow. Or today, I guess.”

Will leans up a bit to look at her.

“She’s Mike’s girlfriend,” Dustin says, and Mike blushes furiously. But he doesn’t have the energy to deny it.

And later, when his mom comes back to pick him up, he begs her to let him stay. And when the Chief, Nancy, and Joyce all say they’re going to be staying and keeping an eye on things, she lets him. Best mom ever.

+

Jim finds Joyce by the coffee cart, sniffing sugar packets after ripping them open but before putting them in the coffee Karen dropped off. He smiles to himself at her suspicious nature.

He walks up to her, holding out his own packets. She looks at him, confused. And he's relieved to not see her look at him with hatred.

"The station always has the crap fake ones," He explains, just a bit sheepish. "I need real sugar in my coffee."

Joyce smiles and takes one and pours it into her drink and takes a sip. "You got pretty beat up there," She says, eyeing his face.

"Fighting monsters will do that to you," Jim says with a shrug that hurts his shoulders. "But if it meant saving those kids, then I'd do it again."

"You're a good cop," She says, like it's an indisputable fact.

"Thank you, Joyce," He says.

"Are you really gonna take El?" She asks, and he finds himself reeling back a bit. There's judgment in her tone and, for not the first time, he's not sure how to read her.

"I said I was gonna, didn't I?"

She frowns at him, "Jim, a child is a responsibility-

"I know, and I'm up for it," He scratches his beard. "Jesus, Joyce. This really isn't up for discussion. You don't have the space, Ted Wheeler is frankly useless and- most importantly, I was a good father to Sarah-

"You were a great father," She interrupts.

He smiles slightly. "And I think I could be a good father to this girl. I have the space, the money, and the time. I also just don't want her with those bastard scientists again."

Joyce smiles.

"And, I asked her," Jim adds, scratching at the back of his neck. "And I apologized. She says she still wants to be able to visit the Wheelers and the Byers, and, if it means keeping them safe, she'll visit the scientists too."

“She forgave you?” Joyce asks.

He nods. “She did.”

Joyce smiles, “Smart girl.” And with that, she leans up and hugs him tight. “I forgive you too, Jim. I- I understand now, I was just-”

“We’re okay, Joyce,” He says, hugging her in the middle of the hallway. “We’ll always be okay.”

+

Jonathan, after waiting for his brother and mom to fall asleep, decides he’s too restless to do the same. He’s not sure where Chief Hopper or Nancy are, but it seems like everyone else is in this room. Will is in his bed, peacefully asleep for the first time in ages. His mom is curled up in a chair right nearby. Eleven is asleep in the second hospital bed, with Mike curled up next to her. Dustin and Lucas are in sleeping bags on the floor, which Mrs. Wheeler thankfully brought over when the kids refused to leave their friends alone in the lab.

Poor kids, he sighs to himself. They’ve already been through so much darkness.

Oddly enough, his fingers itch to take a picture even though his camera is safe in his house. “A crowded room” or “Healing Visits” are the corny titles that come to mind, but mostly he’s struck by the composition. Their bruised, beaten bodies are dark against the sterile brightness of the room.

He stretches a bit in the uncomfortable plastic chair, his entire body (but mostly his ankle, shoulders, and back) are so sore.

A throat clears from behind him and he sees Chief Hopper standing in the doorway. “Hey, kid.”

“Hello, Chief.” There’s a weirdness between them, but Jonathan has more respect for him than he does for his dad, so that’s something at least.

“I think we can do without the formalities for now,” Hopper says,

rubbing at his face, "I'll take the first watch if you want to get a snack or somethin'."

Jonathan nods and stands, favoring his right leg. It should heal in a couple weeks, thank god. "Thanks."

As he goes to leave, Hopper says, "And I think I saw the Wheeler girl by the vending machines."

Jonathan feels his cheeks burn but says nothing as he exits the room.

And if he goes to the vending machines, well, it's not Hopper's business.

The hallways are empty, except for one small girl sitting on the floor, enveloped in her dress and her cast. He's struck by the memory of the last time he saw her in such a way, but instead of a school hallway mourning her best friend and now she's in a laboratory, mourning her entire night. Maybe more.

"Nancy?" He asks, kneeling down next to her.

She looks up, her face streaked with tears, and then she places her chin on her knees and stares straight ahead, her fingers playing with the petals of the corsage that's still on her wrist.

Not sure what else to do, and not wanting to leave her alone, he sits down next to her. They're not touching, not saying a word.

Before he knows what's happening, her head moves to rest on his shoulder, and shortly after, she turns into his side and sobs.

He pulls her into him, this brave girl who can fight monsters, defend her family, and beat with a bat like no one else, who is now crying. His heart aches slightly, but he's glad she's not fighting this.

"I got you," He murmurs as she cries, "It'll be okay."

And he hopes she believes it.

Lucas awakes with a jolt. This nightmare was the worst one he's ever had, by far. Dead bodies of his friends and family getting eaten by the Demogorgon, or worse, throwing up slugs and becoming the monsters themselves. And then, he gets chased and chased until the nightmare wakes him up.

He's shaking, and he looks around the dark hospital room.

Everyone is still asleep, which makes sense since the clock says it's 3 in the morning. But then, he hears rustling, and then sees, in the light from the hallway, El move upright.

"Lucas?" She asks, and her voice is quiet and nervous.

And he doesn't know why, but Lucas starts to cry. He's not a little kid anymore, and he hasn't cried since he was ten, but there he is.

El makes a noise, and he's afraid she might use her powers to fix him. Instead, he watches as she moves from the bed, even with all the wires and stuff sticking out of her, and safely moves beside him on the floor.

"Hurt?" She asks, frowning and kneeling beside him.

He shakes his head and tries to wipe the tears off his face because he feels like a baby. "Ju-just sad, El, it's fine."

At first, she does nothing. Then almost awkwardly, she pulls him into a hug and he hugs her back. "Safe," She says, holding him. "You're good."

Lucas needs the words she's saying, because he knows she believes them. But he's still crying.

He hears someone scramble. "El?" Mike's voice is frantic. Now his head is sticking up from the bed. Even though it's still dark, Mike immediately moves down beside them.

He looks so sleepy, but so concerned, and Lucas feels so grateful for the people in this room.

"You okay?" Mike asks.

Lucas says, "I'm fine." But instead of leaving it be, Mike leans over and hugs him, pulling them all close.

Unlike El, Mike says nothing. And Lucas appreciates it, but he likes both. He was never one for hugs, but this is good for him, he knows it.

"Thanks," Lucas says, using his shirt to wipe his face, wincing as he rubs against his cut.

"We're friends," El says. "We don't lie, and we help." He watches as El looks to Mike and Mike nods.

"We'll protect you," Mike says, in that way he has that instantly has Lucas believing him. "Always."

"Promise," El says.

"I feel like a baby," He admits, with a watery laugh.

"Don't," Mike says gently. "Today was hard, but we're all together again. El's back, Will is safe, and we didn't have to wear tuxes."

Lucas lets out a surprised laugh while El looks confused. "We'll explain later, El," He says. "Just try to sleep okay?"

"Okay," She nods, and tugs Mike back up so they're on the bed again.

With that, Lucas crawls back into his sleeping bag, feeling better.

+

When El wakes up, she sees Chief and Joyce asleep in chairs, sipping from cups and playing with shiny paper. The clock reads five-four-seven.

She makes a soft noise to get their attention, not feeling up for actual words yet. They both look up and walk over to her.

"Hey, El," Joyce says. She loves Joyce's voice. It's so soft and pretty. It makes her safe. She'd have happy dreams of Joyce's voice in the Upside Down. But her real voice is so much better.

She nods at them. “Hi Joyce, Hi Chief.” Mike once told her that was polite, to say hi and to say their names if she knew them.

The two share a look and Chief says to her, “Are you sure you want to live with me, El?”

Again, she nods. “You’re good,” She says. “Now,” She clarifies.

Joyce smiles and says, “You can visit us whenever you want, I promise. And I’m sure the Wheelers would love to have you too.”

El perks up a bit, her whole body feeling bad not mattering anymore. “Mike? Mike’s house?”

“Yep, Mike’s house,” Chief says. “But you’ll live with me in my house, and I’ll take care of you.”

“Will you be my Papa?” She asks, recoiling a bit. She doesn’t want another Papa.

Again, Joyce and Chief look at each other. They say nothing but it's almost like they can read each other's minds. “How about we start with Chief,” He offers, seeming to understand her. She likes that.

Even though she’s said it already, El says “Chief,” testing out the word in the new way. And then she says, “Will you have Eggos at your house?”

“Yes, of course,” Chief says. “All the Eggos you want.”

And El smiles.

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Tuesday, February 14, 1984

Wrap around

Take a hold

Of my heart.

Joyce hears a knock on her front door and frowns slightly. She's not expecting anyone, her sons are at school, she's working the late shift tonight because she's single- Lonnie. Dammit.

He had this bad habit back when Jonathan and Will were younger, he'd show up drunk and try to get her back, usually around the more romantic holidays, like today.

She hasn't heard from her deadbeat ex in months, and he had never done it this early in the day, but still. She grabs a leftover nail bat (one of the few physical reminders that what happened back in January was real) and opens the door.

There's no one there.

Confused, Joyce sets the bat against the wall and goes to close it when her eyes drift down to a vase of red roses just sitting on her porch. A quick count reveals there are eleven of them, all beautiful and fragrant. She reaches down and takes one to sniff it, touched.

A voice speaks up, "Like 'em?" Startled, she nearly drops the rose to find the noise.

"Jim Hopper," Amused, she runs a finger down the thornless stem as she takes in his appearance.

He's out of uniform, in a nice button-down and jeans, standing against his squad car also holding a single red rose.

Honestly, she feels like she's in a romance novel. And if you had asked her how that would have made her feel a year ago, she would have scoffed. Now, she feels all warm and fuzzy.

"Shouldn't you be with your ward?" She accuses slightly but gently, playfully, with a smile.

"Who said I wasn't?" He gestures with a nod to his car. El is sitting in the front seat of the car, fiddling with the dashboard. She looks up and waves at Joyce. Joyce waves back.

"She helped me pick the roses," Jim admits while rubbing the back of his neck. "I'm useless with that stuff."

“So you asked the superhero?” She asks, giving him a look while using Will’s favorite nickname for her.

“Do you like them?” He counters, pure cop, getting to the bottom of it.

With a smile, she sniffs the rose in her hand again. “Yes,” She says. “Good decision.”

“So was she,” Jim says, looking over at the girl in his care. “I got the flowers as a thank you,” He says, looking back at her.

Oddly disappointed, she focuses on the thank you, not the perceived romance that she had subconsciously envisioned. Her, with Jim Hopper? Ridiculous. Totally, utterly ridiculous.

“A thank you? For what?”

He looks down into her eyes as he steps forward. “I’m glad I have El, but this whole thing would have been really hard without you and your help. So... thank you.”

“It was mostly you,” She says, needing him to know that. “You are great with her, you- you just *get* each other.”

Like she knows they’re talking about her, El looks up at them again, offers a smile, then turns back to the car. She loves that thing, all the buttons and dials.

“Another thing I wanted to say was...” Joyce turns back to Hopper, who then continues, “I find you beautiful, Joyce. You’re strong and good and amazing, and I was wondering if you’d like to go to dinner with me tonight.”

She feels honest-to-god butterflies in her stomach. And it’s not as scary as she would have originally feared.

“Yes,” She says, grinning widely, but then she remembers and immediately says, “No.”

Jim raises an eyebrow. Laughing a bit, she explains, “I’m working tonight.”

“Oh okay,” He seems relieved, which makes her blush. She feels like a dopey teenager. “Not to press you into a corner or anythin’, but I was gonna take El shopping since she needs clothes that aren’t just Nancy’s. Wanna come with? I’m sure you’d have better opinions on this stuff that I would.”

“I’d love to, if that’s okay with her,” Joyce says, not wanting to put the young girl in an uncomfortable position.

“She keeps telling me to make a move, like she knows what that means,” He says, looking back at her. “She’s a schemer is what she is.”

Again, El looks up at them at the perfect time and sends them a smugly-innocent look.

“Well, she is a superhero,” Joyce says, “I’m sure she knows what she’s doing.”

And with that, Jim leans down and kisses her.

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Nancy is glad she has a good girl reputation. It used to be a source of embarrassment, but it has its useful moments, like when she needs to get the locker combination of her crush to give him a present without his knowledge.

But if the school asks, it’s for the Valentine’s Day Committee. (Whatever that is.)

She places the photograph in an obvious spot in his locker, right on top of his textbooks. She knows he won’t check his locker again until lunch, so she just has to book it from the science hall to watch him read it. She’s a bit nervous, bearing her heart out, but she’s holding onto the belief that it will pay off.

Casually, Nancy looks at the hallway. Her teacher let her class out early, so it’s not that crowded yet. Her eyes linger on the lack of visible damage. Mike told her that Hopper and Joyce worked a deal with Hawkins Lab so they’d fix the entire school of all the damage done by the Demogorgon. She can barely tell that a monster wreaked

havoc on her high school and old middle school, but if she focuses, she can remember the places and they will flash back to her vividly.

But she's gotten better at dealing with everything, especially now that she talks to her mom, Jonathan, Joyce, and even Mike and El about it. Those kids are surprisingly good listeners.

The bell rings, and she focuses on the present.

And, *well, near future*, as she shuts his locker.

Later, Nancy is pushing her way through the mass of bodies since the hallways are suddenly congested now that it's almost lunchtime. Of course, her stupid chemistry teacher kept her class late. She contemplates using her cast as a bat or a barrier to get through. *I saved your life, let me get to him or I will bash your head in with my plaster cast.*

Once Nancy can see him, in a grey shirt and blue jeans that make him look like James Dean, she stops in her tracks even though she hates it when freshmen do that. He's holding the note while leaned against the nearest closed lockers, smiling softly.

Relieved, Nancy gets the strength to head over.

"Hi Jonathan," She greets, scratching at her cast. It comes off in two weeks, but she definitely plans on keeping it. Everyone's signed it, even people she doesn't completely know outside of their reputation, and Jonathan, Will, and El (who's definitely improving under Will's teachings) have drawn doodles on it. But she's developed the bad habit of scratching at it when she's nervous.

"Hey," He says, finally looking up from the photo. "You took this?"

Her cheeks flush and she knows it. She looks down at the photo to give herself a distraction, even though she's memorized it by now.

It's Jonathan in the woods, using her own family's camera. They were both terrified of the woods for a while, so they forced themselves to go outside and explore in the daytime to remind them everything was okay. This was during their third outing, nearing sundown, and Jonathan just looked so beautiful in the light, smiling at the trees in

all his winter gear that she just had to snap a photo.

Even though he's tried to teach her, Nancy's not very good at developing the photos so she can see some errors, but he's not pointing them out.

Oh right, she has to answer his question, "I took it."

And he smiles again and she can see he's blushing a bit too.

"You should flip it over," She says before she loses the nerve.

He looks at her, a bit confused, but flips it over.

And she watches as he smiles.

"Too corny?" Nancy has to check. She's never been that good at thinking up clever things, so she wrote: *You're picture perfect, will you go out with me this Friday?*

"It's perfect," He says, and there's a smile on his face. "And I'd love to go out with you this Friday."

Nancy smiles and leans up and goes to peck him on the cheek. But he must have thought she was going for his lips, because suddenly they're one of those couples who are kissing in the hallway.

Jonathan pulls away after a moment, "Oh, um, sorry I thought-"

"You weren't wrong," She reassures him. "But c'mon, it's lunch time. We can make out later." She extends her hand out for him to take.

He takes it, "It's a date."

Yes it is.

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Mike can't stop jiggling his leg. He's anxiously waiting, constantly turning his head to look out the window.

"You're so annoying, stop it," Dustin says, fiddling with the knobs on the Wheelers' television. For once, their group isn't in the basement

of Mike's house. They're in the living room, waiting for Chief Hopper to drop El off so they can play. And Mike, specifically, is waiting for El because he has a present for her. It's just a card and a stupid toy, but he wants to give them to her.

"You're annoying," Mike fires back, distractedly, thinking he sees their car. But it's someone else. He deflates a bit.

"You need to calm down," Will says, shuffling their playing cards instead of preparing the D&D board. They don't have enough time for an entire campaign today, but El needs to learn a card game anyway.

"He's too busy waiting for his *girlfriend*," Lucas teases, making kissing noises. Dustin wraps his arms around himself and fakes like he's making out with someone and Will laughs boisterously.

"Shut up," Mike tells them, feeling himself blush. They laugh at him, but none of it is cruel. Still though, he tries his best to ignore them and wait for her.

He perks up and sees the now-familiar squad car approach and pull into the cul-de-sac. Without any other prompting, he runs out the door, clutching the two presents.

Even though he's outside, El doesn't see him yet, exiting the car and waving goodbye to Hopper. She's wearing a new dress, he thinks. It's pale blue and looks soft. Her hair is now to her chin, curling at the edges and being held back by these weird pins Nancy sometimes uses.

As Hopper pulls out of their driveway, El turns to him and smiles.

"Hi Mike," She greets, hands clasped in front of herself. She looks so cute. She's always been pretty, but he feels so suddenly overwhelmed by the cuteness.

His hands are stuffed behind himself, concealing the presents. They suddenly feel stupid and pointless so he distracts her with, "I, uh-new dress?"

She looks down at it and nods, turning back to him, "Yes, Joyce bought it for me. Pretty, isn't it?"

He nods, his tongue suddenly too tied for his mouth, "Yeah."

They both say nothing for a moment, and he goes to try to ask another question but then he realizes that if he just gives her the present instead of with the card, then it's just a friend giving another friend a gift, nothing more.

"I got you a present," He hands her the stuffed animal. He paid for it with his own allowance money, and it was the softest one in the store. Nancy said it was great, but she also thinks *Star Trek* is better than *Star Wars*. So it's up in the air.

"A puppy?" She takes it, and looks it over in her hands. "For me?"

Mike nods again, "For you. I know the Chief said you guys can't have an *actual* dog yet, so I figured this was good."

She hugs it tight to her chest. "Great," She corrects, then pauses. "What's that?"

He had accidentally shown a glimpse of the card. Dammit. "It's nothing-"

El frowns, still clutching the puppy, "Friends don't lie."

Sighing, Mike reluctantly hands her the card. "It's stupid," He warns her.

She simply shakes her head and reads it. She's always been able to read, apparently, it's more the talking part that's hard. But she's getting way better.

It's just a stupid card that says "Will you be my valentine?" with a heart on it. It's a really dumb idea. And he's about to tell her to forget it when she says, "What's a 'valentine?'"

Jesus, this is gonna be harder than he thought. He struggles to think of a safe definition, but then he goes with, "Remember when I said we weren't brother and sister, before you left? But I also said we weren't just friends?"

She nods, "Yes."

“Well, a valentine is another word for that, I guess,” He tries to explain. “What we are- *were*, anyway, when we-”

“Kissed,” El finishes for him. After what feels like forever and what is actually only a couple seconds, she says, “Yes.”

“Yes?” Now Mike is the confused one. “Yes, what?”

Instead of speaking, she leans forward and kisses him.

It’s not the like the first time they kissed, where it’s kind of fast and weird and confusing. Now it’s still weird, in the unfamiliar sense, but softer and honestly nicer.

Once they pull away, Mike’s face is already burning red. He knows it. But it’s so worth it.

“Yes,” She says, smiling. “We’ll be valentines. Promise?”

“Promise,” He answers, reaching over and grabbing her hand.

“AWWW!” There’s a chorus behind them, and they both spin around to see their friends sitting by the open window, watching their every move. Mike’s blush worsens.

“Wrap it up, you guys!” Dustin calls to them, spinning his finger in the air to mimic the universal signal for what he just said.

“Yeah, we need to teach El how to play poker!” Will adds, shaking the deck in his own hand. “We’ll be in the living room,” With that, he pulls their other two friends away from the window, with Lucas making kissy noises as he goes.

“Poker?” El asks him, squeezing his hand once.

“C’mon, it’s fun,” Mike says, gently tugging her back towards their friends.

“Fun,” She repeats with a bright grin, and the two of them run into Mike’s house, hand in hand.

Author's Note:

if you made it this far, consider this a marriage proposal. I've been working on this for over a month, and I'm so excited to share this with people. I hope you enjoyed this, and if you have any feedback, please feel free to leave a comment or message me on tumblr [@eleventhemage](#). Have a good day, and thanks for reading!